



## Sport and literature

by Susan Bandy\*

The literature of the ancient world is one of the principal sources of knowledge concerning women and their sporting practices. In his descriptions of ancient Greece, Pausanias tells us about the ancient Games and of the Heraia, a foot race held for maidens which honoured Hera. He describes as well the *chiton*, an off-the-shoulder costume worn by runners, now displayed on a famous statue, The Spartan Runner, in the Vatican Museum. Some time later, Juvenal, a well-known satirist, wrote about the physical activity of upper-class women in Rome (*Satire VI*); and, Sappho, the first Greek lyric poetess, gave, for the first time, views about women and their lives. Curiously none of these writers provides information about the first female victory in the ancient Olympic Games. It is instead the victor herself who does so:

"I, Cynisca, who descend from Spartan Kings,  
Place this stone myself to mark  
The race I won with my quick-footed steeds  
The only woman in all of Greece to win."<sup>1</sup>

These words, inscribed on the base of a monument at Olympia, commemorate Cynisca's second victory; in the *quadriga* race (a race for a four-horse chariot) in the early part of the fourth century BC. Although women were barred from attending and competing in any of the Panhellenic festivals, they were allowed to own, train, and enter horses in these festivals using substitute male drivers. Thus Cynisca, born to a noble family of Sparta, became the first woman to claim an Olympic victory.

Cynisca's life, much like that of Sappho, is largely one of legend, recorded only by her words and a bronze statue which honours her achievements as a horsewoman. Such legends suggest certain

similarities and reveal the exceptional nature of these women's lives. They were from upper-class Greek families and were therefore privileged - Sappho because she could travel and write, and Cynisca because she had the means to own and train horses.

In the ancient world and throughout much of the history of the Western world, it has always been the privileged few who participate in public life, including in the worlds of sport and literature. Unlike Cynisca and Sappho, the majority of women who entered these worlds did so as observers and spectators. If women were allowed to attend sporting events: they were cheerleaders, not athletes. Their role in the literary arts was a subordinate, supporting one



"The Spartan runner".

as well; they were muses, not writers. Those few women who became writers were chroniclers, and often used sport to record important events and to characterize their cultures. In the first novel ever written, *The Tale of Genji*, Lady Murasaki Shikibu weaves sport into the cultural fabric of 11th-century court life of Heian Japan as she chronicles the hunting expeditions, polo games, and football matches which were the distractions of upper-class males. Similarly, Dame Juliana Berners in her poems "The Companyes of Bestys and Foul" and "The Properties of a Good Greyhound" and in her book *The Boke of Huntyng* records the sporting experiences of 15th-century British aristocracy. Katherine Philips's "The Irish Greyhound" and Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare" continue this tradition of observing and recording men's sporting activities in the Irish culture.

In the 18th century, the short story became the genre in which Mary Russell Mitford wrote about the English view of the amateur in her "Village Cricket", and of the importance of cricket to the English in "A Country Cricket Match". In 20th-century France, the novels of Colette, a horsewoman herself, describe the experiences of male athletes at the end of the Tour de France in *Dans la Foule* and of the boxers at the circus in *La Paix Chez les Bêtes* as does Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine*.

In addition to these well-known authors, other women have written throughout the ages and in many different cultures. Often, this literature portrays the experiences of women in sport and various other forms of physical activity such as dance, exercise, and play. Unfortunately we know very little about such experiences. These writings have been ignored, marginalized, and silenced by the dominant male voice in

literature. Anthologies devoted to sport, even those purported to be general and inclusive, continue to exclude women's writings. Anthologies devoted exclusively to women's writings rarely include works on sport. Those works that have been published remain on the periphery in obscure journals and magazines. Consequently, very little is known about the meaning and significance of sport in women's lives, and we have yet to fully consider the notion that the experiences of females in sport may indeed be different from those of males.

The 20th century has witnessed the entrance of increasing numbers of women into the sporting and literary worlds, and women are no longer content to be cheerleaders, spectators, or muses. Their voices must be heard and their achievements acknowledged. The most accomplished female writers now win Noble Prizes in literature, and many of the best female athletes in the world have become what *Newsweek* called "transnational heroes, idols without borders" in 1996, a year heralded as "the year of the woman". Together, female athletes and writers have begun to expand perceptions of sport and literature not only across the boundary of gender, but also across cultural and national boundaries as the sporting experiences of women have been given meaning and resonance in serious, interpretative literature.

Sport literature written by women encompasses all literary genres - novels, short stories, drama, autobiographies or prose memoirs, and poetry. A brief review of some of these works reveals the international scope of this literature, its diversity, and the common themes which offer insight into the meanings women have attributed to sport through literature.

Female novelists of the early 20th century were the first to use sporting themes and to create female protagonists who were athletes. Many of these works have been classified as juvenile



*Bronze statue of Cynisca, the Spartan horsewoman.*

or young adult fiction. In the late 1800s, basketball was extremely popular in the women's colleges in the United States, and the protagonists of the works of Jessie Graham Flower, Gertrude Morrison, and Edith Bancroft were college students who played basketball.

A similar trend is evident in France during the same period, only the sport is tennis. In the mid-1920s, Doctor Marthe Bertheaume wrote *Sportive* and Suzanne Lenglen, the great tennis champion and Olympic victor, wrote *The Love Game* featuring a female tennis player. Somewhat later, Guillemette de Beauville's *Alyette : Championne Cadette de Tennis* was published.

More serious and sophisticated treatments of sporting themes have been written in the past several decades. French writer Joëlle Wintrebert writes about doping in *Les Olympiades Truquées*. The work of England's Liza Cody features an unusual protagonist. Eva Wylie, a B-grade professional wrestler in *Bucket Nut* and *Monkey Wrench*. In the United States, Jenifer Levin's novel *Water Dancer* examines the challenges of long-distance swim-

ming for Dorey Thomas, a swimmer suffering from a nervous breakdown. Detective fiction has also treated the subject of Olympic sport, including in Emma Lathen's *Going for the Gold* and Meredith Phillips' *Death Spiral: Murder at the Winter Olympics*.

More numerous and shorter fictional accounts by noteworthy writers from a variety of cultures have provided additional insight into the female perspective of sport. Many of the earlier short stories provide varying views of competition. One of the earliest accounts of sport in the 20th century has been provided by Germany's Marielieuse Fleisser, a dramatist, who wrote about cycling in "Radfahren Wider Willen" ("Biking against one's will"). One of the first contemporary stories to be included in an anthology of sport literature was written by South African author Doris Lessing: "Through the Tunnel" explores the competitive aspect of sport in a story about a young boy who must prove something to himself by swimming alone in dangerous waters. More recently, Christina Perio Rossi of



*Bronze statuette of a female runner.*



*Black-figured female runners or dancers displayed on ancient Greek pottery of the classical era.*

Uruguay used a young male runner in “Breaking the Speed Record” to suggest that winning is perhaps not the only purpose of sport.

Unusual perspectives of sport are also offered by women who write about hunting and fishing. An abundance of poetry and short stories portrays the view of the chased or hunted rather than that of the hunter. In addition to her non-fictional account of boxing, Joyce Carol Oates, a highly regarded contemporary American author, has explored the female perspectives of hunting in her short story “The Buck”, which is included in Pam Houston’s *Women on Hunting*, a recently published collection of short stories and poems on the subject.

The role of spectator has also given women different perspectives about being outsiders. Beryl Markham, a well-known aviator, horsewoman and author from Kenya, and Carson McCullers of the United States, explore this theme in “The Splendid Outcast” and “The Jockey,” respectively. The perspective of the outsider in these works reminds us of the perspective of stories about hunting and fishing in that the point of view provided is one from the outside looking in.

Female playwrights have explored sport “from the inside” by dramatizing the lives of great sportswomen in order to examine cultural barriers that female athletes, unlike their male counterparts, must confront in the world of sport.

The “insiders” of Cynthia Cooper’s one-act play “How She Played the Game” are six athletes: Sonja Henie, Greta Bergmann, Babe Didrikson, Elenora Scars, Althea Gibson, and Gertrude Ederle. All of these women figure prominently in the international history of women in sport, and the unifying theme which runs throughout the play is one of societal barriers, sexism, racism, and “classism”, which resulted from their participation in sport.

Two Australian playwrights have created fictional athletes as central characters. Janis Halodis’s play “Heart for the Future” (1989) features a long-distance swimmer. In Suzanne Spinner’s “Running Up a Dress” (1986), the relationship between mother and daughter be-

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comes increasingly complex because the shoulders of the daughter, a swimmer, are too enormous.

The view of the insider is perhaps nowhere more apparent and vivid than in the autobiographical accounts or prose memoirs written by many accomplished female athletes of the 20th century. In the great tradition of Cynisca, female athletes have responded to the urgings of the French feminist Helene Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: "Woman must write woman [...] She must write herself." In so doing, these athletes have, in countless memoirs, told of their exceptional lives in sport. Recalling some of the more noteworthy gives us an idea of the international scope of the works and the numerous sports represented in them. Norwegian Sonja Henie was perhaps the first to write such an account in *Wings on Her Feet*. Her book was soon followed by Babe Didrikson Zaharias's *This Life I've Led*. Dawn Frazier's *Below the Surface: Confessions of an Olympic Champion*, and Olga Connolly's *The Rings of Destiny*. The number of prose memoirs has increased dramatically since the 1970s. *Mary P., An Autobiography* by Ireland's Mary Peters; *Rosi Mittermaier: Ski Zirkus* by Germany's Rosi Mittermaier; and *Elena Belova* by Russia's Elena Belova provide a contemporary perspective of international competition in sport. More recently, *400 Mètres Pour Gagner* by France's Marie-José Percé further illuminates the life of an Olympic runner. Of all writers, it is the female poets of the world who have been the most prolific in sporting literature. The subject of sport and the female athlete has engaged some of the world's most accomplished and well-known poets throughout the 20th century, who have followed in the poetic footsteps of Berners, Philips, and Cavendish. The most noteworthy among them are: Wendy Cope of England; Diane Ackerman, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich of the United States; Renée Vivien and Simonne Jacquemard of

France; Judith Wright of Australia; Ilse Aichinger of Austria; and Helga Novak and Ingeborg Bachmann of Germany. Perhaps more than any of the other literary genres in which women have explored the significance and meaning of sport, poetry is the most fruitful for unearthing themes that provide an understanding of the female experience in sport. In spite of the vast range of this literature and its diversity, there is one unifying theme in these works - the quest for autonomy: self-definition, self-determination, and identity. While this theme is common to women's writings in general, when it is presented within the context of sport it becomes fertile ground for exploring ideas such as exclusion, power, control, transcendence, freedom, body images, sexuality, and

identity. In these works, sport becomes the expression of a larger movement toward female autonomy.

The themes of exclusion, the body, freedom, and identity have inspired some of the best poetry. Here, women examine their roles in sport, their feelings about their body, their liberation in and through sport, and their identity as athletes.

Their exclusion from sport has often required that women experience sport as outsiders - spectators - and this perspective has allowed them to interpret sport differently. Rebecca Stutsman's "Honorable Mention" reflects an awareness of such exclusion. She writes "Glory's given to the first / and pity to the last; / Ah, tragic ones indeed are we, / The neither crowned nor slain". Lillian Mor-



One of the first women's basketball teams, that of Smith College in the United States, in the late 1800s.

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rison's "The Sprinters" suggests the importance of the role of the female spectator: "Beside ourselves / (It is for us they run!) / We shout and pound the stands / for one to win / Loving him..." Morrison also notes the constraints for women of the role of spectator, drawing parallels between the restraints placed on the runners by the clock and those placed on the female spectators: "...the bands / Which lock us in".

The view of the outsider has also encouraged women to gratefully acknowledge the "insider", the female sports hero, and to identify with women who compete. Hyacinth Hill's "To the Olympians" is written from the perspective of one who is "Chained to a job that chains me to a chair, / chained by the clock, I drive from home to work". It is the athletes who "have saved me skiing down a lake / of snow and air, half eagle and half swan. / ...Immobile I sit and watch you leap and spin, / flexing my muscles, winning when you win."

Exclusion from sport has other consequences. Until rather recently, women's lack of participation in sport and physical activity perpetuated a socially sanctioned view of beauty which required a frail and inactive body, further limiting their physical freedom. Diane Ackerman's "Pumping Iron" illustrates the dilemma concerning the female body, physical strength, and the "role conflict" women confront when engaging in sport. Female weight lifters do not want "...the bunched look of / male lifters", but rather "a trim waist / two hands might grip / as a bouquet".

As women have engaged in sport, however, the view of the body expressed in their poetry changes; the body, so important to the athlete, ages, as Barbara Smith realizes in her poem "Late Bloomers". Ageing athletes, most of whom were excluded from sport as young girls, already "... have three strikes before they begin, / Thus coming late to your lifelong joy / After biceps and metatarsal joints / Are long past reshaping".

They come to sport "Being three times past Olympic competition," to "...share [...] championship joy / and every day, every game, the same good intentions".

The impact of the ageing body on athletes who have been athletes all their lives is even more profound and disconcerting, as Judith Hougen reveals in "Muscles' Hougen Comes Out of Softball Retirement". Through the body, a retrospective is revealed to the athlete. "Years ago, I was so lovely / at second; diving for the fly in the ninth / kneecaps pounding packed infield in a hard / tumble, raising a pregnant glove above / my grimed-out body." After coming out of retirement, the nights become long ones filled with hot baths and liniment, "with my knees two small sloshing buckets / of pain". Yet the athlete, forever longing and striving for perfection, stretches "for the grass-streaked splendor of the ball" and "the chance for one thick / leather hand to reach into that much beauty".

As more and more female athletes write about their experiences in sport, the themes which resonate throughout their works are about freedom and identity - freedom *from* the societal constraints of gender and the ascribed role of spectator, and freedom *for* the choice of roles and identity as athlete. Curiously, it is running which has inspired some of the most compelling works on these themes.

Stephanie Plotin's "Marathoner" speaks to the liberating possibilities of sport. Realizing that her high-heeled shoes "gnawed at her toes" and that "her skirt was a hobble", this runner begins her journey on bleached sidewalks. Soon, she is running up the office stairs, trotting to the Xerox machine, discovering grass, and exploring forest trails. Surprisingly the marathon is not her final destination: "Twenty-six miles soon / wasn't enough for her - / one hundred almost satisfied her; / she was nearly getting somewhere". In the end, "...her legs were / too strong / to be tied now

/ and no one can catch her", not even her partner who told her to "Dress Respectably".

The theme of identity runs throughout the works of Grace Butcher, both an accomplished runner and poet, and her poetry provides an exceptional view of the impact of participation in sport on the words of the poet: here, the runner is poet and the poet is runner. Whether she is "Training (in the Woods)", "Training (on the Track)", "Runner at Twilight", or "Runner Hurt", Butcher is a runner, and when she runs, her sense of self and identity are restored through her body. She writes: "When I run, my body / draws in upon itself, / ...old rhythms restore themselves. / ...Harmonies reappear / ...Something in me tunes in / ...Nothing is more right than this."

Since the beginning of the fourth century BC when Cynisca commemorated her victory with words, women have continued to use language to give enduring life to sport, otherwise ephemeral. Since that era, countless women have crossed the boundaries of sport and literature, and they have continued to reveal new perspectives on sport's nature, significance, and meaning. Authors from around the world have written in all literary genres about their perspectives on women's roles in sport, their feelings about the body, their liberation in and through sport, and their identity as athletes. What we learn from this literature is that women are, at long last, free to experience sport and to use language to commemorate their experiences. As Grace Butcher says. "Nothing is more right than this".

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Tom Dodge in Dodge, Tom. *A Literature of Sports*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980.