

GRACE WITHOUT PRESSURE: CANADIAN SCINTILLATION AND THE MEDIA IN THE AMSTERDAM OLYMPIC GAMES

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The 1928 Olympic Games were awarded in 1923 to Amsterdam in the city's fourth bid for the Summer Games. The story of the inter-world war Olympic Games festivals is, as we all know, one of continuous and spectacular growth in terms of number of competitors, world-wide interest and standards of performance. With some compelling evidence, Goodhart & Chataway maintain that it was the Finns' domination of distance running (in which Paavo Nurmi is the supreme example) and field events that brought a heightened sense of professionalism and a sensational rise in performance standards to the 3 sets of Games in the decade of the 1920s and beyond.¹ Concomitantly, there was a professionalization of media coverage for the Olympic Games. So significant was the print media to the promotion of the festivals that the executive committee for the Amsterdam Olympics guarded the world press by not allowing the results of contests to be radio broadcast.² Presumably, committee members wanted the press corps in full attendance for propaganda reasons.

Forty-six nations competed in 14 different sports within the 40,000 seat stadium that was constructed in a converted swamp on the outskirts of Amsterdam.³ Even though there was a greater representation of nations in the medals, General Douglas MacArthur, then president of the USOC began his Olympic report by proudly declaring the American team winners of the 1928 Olympic Games.⁴ It is upon the elements of winning and media coverage which I wish to focus in this paper. The 1928 Games were a watershed for Canadian Olympic track and field accomplishments and my intent in this paper is to examine a sampling of the Canadian print media coverage of these contests and then to funnel my analysis on the nature and effects of media coverage on the two Canadian media magnets in 1928, Percy Williams and Ethel Catherwood. For the un-initiated and as a brief reminder, Williams was the "surprise package" of the Games; this 20 year old Vancouver "school-boy" won both the 100-metre and 200-metre sprint events. Catherwood, dubbed the Saskatoon Lily by the press won the gold medal in the women's high jump. 1928 was the first year women were permitted to compete in Olympic track and field events and the Canadian women's team dominated in performance in spite of Canada's vote not to allow women to compete in summer Olympic games.⁵

My underlying interest in this topic stems from a fascination with the effects of pressure, the pressure of victory and renown upon Olympic performers. The pedestal upon which the media consecrates "successful" Olympic athletes is both awesome and perilous. Both Catherwood and Williams were unwittingly subjected to the media's pressure cooker and the lessons of their individual reactions are still valid.

In an earlier study,⁶ I examined the nature of the reporting, the amount of reporting, the contrasts in reporting and the journalistic message/flavour inherent in six major Canadian urban newspapers (Halifax Herald, Montreal Daily Star, Toronto Daily Star, Winnipeg Free Press, Calgary Herald, Vancouver Sun/Victoria Daily Colonist) and compared these elements across the Canadian coverage for the 1908, 1928 and 1948 Olympic Games. My assumptions

were that the print media served both a pulpit (critical comment) and a broadsheet (description) function and that newspapers must be used as data only with the clear understanding that the primary function of the press is to sell itself. With particular reference to the 1928 Games, it was clear that the Games were reflected as an accepted, major international sporting event for men and, to a certain extent for women.

The dominant impression from the Canadian newspaper coverage of the Amsterdam Games is national pride. Canadian journalists waxed eloquently on the perceived prestige of Canadian victories especially those of Percy Williams, “the new Dutch Cleanser”, as Toronto newspaper columnist, Ted Reeve dubbed him.⁷ The sprint events for men were scheduled early in the Olympic program and Williams’ unexpected triumphs fuelled a patriotic fervour among some journalists. For example, W.A. Heivitt of the TDS rose to full salute after the 100-metre final. He exhorted:

May the flag of Canada be raised often to the masthead in the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam.⁸

In gracious fashion, the American press commended “the Dominion” for “sending her men and women to Amsterdam” and the same press predicted “far-reaching” effects of such “Canadian prestige raised to a high pinnacle.”⁹ The Canadian press, in contrast, injected itself with blatant anti-American sentiment and satirizations of United States idiosyncrasies. For example, it was common knowledge that the entire American contingent remained on board their ship, the President Roosevelt throughout the duration of the Games and there were rumours rampant of excessive quantities of food and other pampered conditions. Thus, when Williams “easily” defeated American sprint aces, Wykoff and McAllister, the TDS puffed:

The next time an American Olympic argonaut sets sail for Europe it might be just as well to leave about eighty tons of its ice cream, two thousand beefsteaks and forty-five of its coaches at home.¹⁰

Equally clear and persistent as the patriotic media hype and its attendant corollary, anti-Americanism was the consistency with which factual information was presented on a daily basis in every newspaper during the course of the Games. Human interest and personal stories on Canadian athletes, complete with action photographs, sketches and cartoons were characteristic across Canada. Critical commentary and issue insights were only apparent in Toronto and Montreal newspapers; the smaller, coastal papers tended to spotlight local flavour; Vancouver papers were careful to remind its readers and all of Canada that Percy Williams was home-grown while the Halifax Herald seized every opportunity to criticize Ontario for its dominance and power in Olympic athlete selection and decision-making. In spite of some localized interest stories, it was remarkably apparent in the 1928 newspapers how much homogenization of reporting occurred. The Canadian Press and other wire services were pointedly printed verbatim or strained for Canadian content. As early as 1928, it can be concluded that the Olympics are only whatever the media chooses to portray. In many ways, the 1928 Canadian press coverage was nepotistic beyond belief. Track and field events have always been the sine qua non of the Summer Games.

Prior to the Amsterdam Olympics, one would have had to be an avid reader and careful observer to realize that Canada was sending a women’s track and field team. Regarded at first as “excess baggage,” the women’s team and their achievements became an icing on the Canadian media cake. “Our Canadian Girl” was bestowed with the “Admiration

of the World” by Mother Canada in a Montreal press cartoon, for example.¹¹ More positively, early coverage of the “girls” shopping sprees and tea parties, turned quickly to victory tributes and significant athletic coverage. One newspaper underscored concisely the reason for this transition in coverage:

The victorious achievement in competition with the best in the world are a credit to themselves and reflect glory on Canada.^{1 2}

In the final analysis then, women’s Olympic coverage became part and parcel of the homogenization process.

In Canada, the Olympic Games may have been only what the media chose to make them in 1928. The real Games, however unknown they may be, are about human performance, real people excelling at sport under an intense, global spotlight. If we distill or sift two athletes out of the 1928 Games and their extraction is justified by the overwhelming attention they received in the Canadian press, what can we learn about the effects of the media on Canadian athletes. Percy Williams and Ethel Catherwood were both enshrined and devastated by the Canadian press.

Williams had just turned 20 when the media catapulted him to fame and glory. Unquestionably an enigma, he did not fit the stereotypic, extroverted, mesomorphic image of the “world’s fastest human.” In many respects, Percy was an un-hero, that is, he was an underdog and unheralded going into the Games and he was unorthodox in his approach to his Olympic discipline. In my view, he was an embodiment of Shakespeare’s great truth found in the play Twelfth Night:

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.¹³

A victim of rheumatic fever in his teens, Williams very definitely had greatness thrust upon him. In his own words a month after his Olympic victories:

I always thought it was a lot of hogwash to say that you ran for your flag and country.¹⁴

The media projected a much different image. Percy was described in the press as:

The Canadian Cheeta
The Canadian Stripling
The Triumph of British Empire
The U.S. Sprinters’ Dragon-Slayer
The Vancouver Flash
The Vancouver Gazelle

among other equally civic and national chauvinistic titles. On the occasion of his victories, Canadian newspaper headlines embraced and magnified him:

WONDERFUL CANADIAN BOY-SPRINTER WINS
U.S. SPORTS WORLD KNOCKED DIZZY
VANCOUVER SCHOOLBOY ACCLAIMED WORLD’S SPEED MARVEL

LOCAL BOY WINS SPRINT CROWN

and the more cogent:

WILLIAMS, CANADA, WINS OLYMPIC 100 METRES¹⁵

There is no question that the sprint events, particularly the 100-metre were/are the crucible events of the Games. But what of the individual ground in that crucible and then raised to the pinnacle of world limelight by the media? A frail 126 pounds, Williams was reserved, shy, quiet, unassuming - an introvert on the extrovert's world-stage. Very little is known of his real father's background or influence except that Mr. Williams was an electrician and a "musical pioneer"¹⁶ in Vancouver. Much more is known about his mother, or at least Percy's close relationship with her. He kept a diary in Amsterdam and wrote to his mother every other day.¹⁷ His first question on arriving back in Canada for a cross country tour of celebration from Quebec City to Vancouver was "Where will mother be joining me?" 'Dot' (Charlotte) Williams was a theatre cashier and Percy, her only child, lived with her until her death in the late 1970s. From all accounts, Percy could be labelled a 'mama's boy' who could never really cut his own umbilical cord into maturity. In the same vein, Williams qua sprinter was very much a creation of the genius of his coach, friend and surrogate-father Bob Granger.

Granger, an inveterate student of sprinting, owned a veritable library of books on racing training and technique. Apparently, Williams had an extremely awkward running style that Granger once said violated every known principle of running. Yet Williams had raw speed, he was just plain fast; the only clue to his potential prior to the games was a timed 10.6 for the 100 metres on grass, a performance equal to the Olympic record and one which central Canada refused to recognize. Granger nurtured Williams to victory; he moulded Percy into a tactical sprinter who always raced against his fellow competitors, never against the clock. For seemingly endless hours, the two of them worked on his start, even in hotel rooms with a mattress braced on the wall. Granger massaged him with cocoa butter and wrapped him in blankets just prior to his races rather than risk pre-race fatigue through more conventional warm-up styles. Here then, was a true Olympic Frankenstein created by "Doctor" Granger. In fact, one of his teammates stated:

Percy didn't like running, Granger drove him to it.¹⁸

And in one of only two interviews Williams ever granted after his running career, "Vancouver's Lindbergh" stated:

I was just like any kid of 20. I was simply bewildered by it all. I didn't like running. Oh, I was so glad to get out of it all.¹⁹

But on three different occasions, Percy was very clear about the main reason for his success:

Whatever I did has been through my coach, Bob Granger.²⁰

Won't Granger be pleased.²¹

Granger was everything. Everything.²²

Williams, the reluctant or un-hero, was un-ready for the media madness that enveloped him like some kind of external cancer. The media made him a human billboard

for Canada. A Vancouver real estate dealer, J. Morris, returned to the city after a tour of eastern Canada and the United States in early September 1928 and he proclaimed:

. . . people as far east as Montreal and as far south as Louisville are talking about Vancouver as a recreation and business centre . . . nearly everyone mentioned Vancouver in connection with Percy Williams' achievement at the Olympics. It is astounding the amount of publicity his accomplishment has meant for Vancouver.²³

The city gave Percy a gala welcome-home celebration and parade, presented him with a blue Graham-Paige automobile and a \$14,000 trust fund in a solid effort to keep him from American university recruiters. Toronto columnist Ted Reeve, in his inimitable fashion, speculated:

It is interesting to wonder which U.S. college will have the honour of completing his education.²⁴

Although Percy Williams and Bob Granger stayed together to compete in the U.S. indoor circuit in 1929, Percy's self-proclaimed favourite racing days (he won 21 of the 22 races and set or tied four world records in those races), there was never any serious threat to up-rooting the Vancouver native. The media's "Canadian Caesar" simply shunned greatness: for example, in 1980 he was awarded the Order of Canada but refused to make an acceptance speech just as he had declined the federal government's invitation in 1975 to honour Canadian Olympic gold medallists.

Percy Williams was a Mary Pickford and a Billy Bishop in his era and in his achievements and was made to be by the media. By 1978, Williams had severe arthritis in his knees and ankles and he took 12 aspirins a day to try to relieve the pain. In 1982, he committed suicide: "He took his own life, the final bizarre act of a man who turned his back to the world in the years following his tumultuous welcome home after his double victory in the 1928 Olympics."²⁵ One insightful journalist wrote, on the occasion of his death:

Nature somehow contrived to play a cruel joke on Percy Williams. He was an introvert miscast in an extrovert's role. Williams wanted to go through life on the outside looking in . . .²⁶

I suggest that nature was not the culprit. It was the media who possessed, created and "miscast" him. In many ways, he was in some kind of vortex of his own personality, caught up in the forces of Granger's domination, the maternalism of Dot Granger and the media hype/hypocrisy, a hypocrisy Percy felt stung by again and again at the hands of AAU officials and civic/Canadian boosterism. Is it possible that not only is the media the Olympics but its athletes are also invented in the process, as is/was the case with Williams?

And what of Ethel Catherwood? In many respects, her case is similar to Williams in that she too was the recipient of Olympic media glory and concomitant escalation, and, similar to Percy, she divorced herself from sport, its glory and even from Canada. As one of my students suggested once, the Saskatoon Lily simply left the field!

Catherwood literally vaulted herself into a more stereotypically feminine version of the Olympic crucible. It was the first Olympics in which women were permitted to compete

in track and field events. There was strong sentiment, championed by de Coubertin himself, that women had no place in Olympic events and the concerns over the exhaustion of some of the female 800-metre competitors at the finish line of that Olympic event in 1928 is well known. All kinds of medical misinformation existed about the supposed ill effects of athletic stress on female reproduction²⁷ Into this climate, came Ethel Catherwood, “the prettiest of all the girl athletes,”²⁸ as the New York Times proclaimed her.

Catherwood’s Bob Granger was Joe Griffiths, University of Saskatchewan physical education faculty member who observed her talents in the high jump, discus and javelin and coached her whenever he could. Only in her mid-teens, in 1926, Catherwood set a new world record in the high jump in Regina - 5 feet, 2 7/16 inches.²⁹ Sometime that same year, financier and millionaire Teddy Oke decided to sponsor her and brought her to Toronto to train at his club, the Parkdale Ladies Athletic Club.³⁰ In that facility, she had the benefit of the coaching of Walter Knox, renowned world professional all-round track and field champion in 1914 and Olympic coach in 1912 and 1920.³¹ Such athletic nurturing paid off in the 1928 Canadian championships when she set a world record for women’s high jump (5 feet, 3 inches) and a Canadian record in the javelin (118 feet, 18 inches).³² With free time to train and all her expenses paid, Catherwood was the right athlete in the right place at the right time. Her genealogical lineage was even traced to Canada’s famed world champion oarsman, Ned Hanlan. Both she and her sister Ginger were given jobs in one of Oke’s brokerage firms.

Catherwood’s event did not happen until the last day of the Games. Therefore, there is considerable bias in unravelling the sexism in reporting her “statuesque beauty” versus her athletic accomplishment. Even Alexandrine Giff’s column in the Star, prior to the high jump, was gossipy and social and non-athletic with banners such as “Canadian Girls in Love with Amsterdam”.³³ On the day she won, Lou Marsh quipped that with the track and field medals, the team’s slogan should be, “Canada, Are You Satisfied?”³⁴ in keeping with Canada’s media-reflected glory. Press photos showed her in scissor-form clearing the bar with the caption, “The Saskatoon Lily Shows Her Class at Amsterdam” while the underlying story contained suggestions that Catherwood was destined for Hollywood movie fame.³⁵ The United Press service story declared Ethel to be “the prettiest of all the women athletes”³⁶ at the Games and the same story underscored how often she was sought out by photographers and “autograph hounds.” In Manitoba, the Winnipeg Free Press predicted the day before her event: “The slim and pretty Miss Catherwood is another girl, who has been flirting with a world’s record which she equalled a year ago in the high jump.”³⁷ Four days later, when a huge civic reception was being planned for Catherwood in Saskatoon, one City Alderman declared, “What is she but a high jumper?” and that no such fuss should be made.³⁸ Calgarians read that she had actually been formally declared “the belle of the Olympiad.”³⁹

It would seem that Catherwood’s media fate was biological, that is female beauty queen first and foremost, athlete a bonus second. Her response to the adulation was swift and not too subtle. At the time of her victory, it seemed that she “smilingly received the plaudits of the huge crowd” and photographers at the Games⁴⁰ Over fifty years later, she stated rather decisively that she “had no fucking interest in being interviewed.”⁴¹ She quickly apologized for her language in the interview and corrected the reporter who underestimated the height of her jump before declaring that she never really even considered herself a Canadian.⁴² Clearly she experienced some kind of frustration since one month after her victory she stated, “she was glad of the success she won overseas because it was for Canada.”⁴³

Very little is known about Ethel following the Games. She and her sister left Canada for the United States in 1929 where Ethel married American athlete Harold Osborn. In the Olympic athlete receptions in 1928, members of the women's team were presented with compact cases, tortoise-shell purses and silver tea services whereas some of the men, such as Joe Wright Jr. received a mahogany table and a sterling silver cabinet.⁴⁴ Whereas the men's team was sent on to further competitions immediately after the Games, the women's team members were permitted to celebrate their victories with a shopping expedition in Paris.⁴⁵ Thus, the media/societal pressure on outstanding female athletes such as Catherwood was different in nature from that applied to Williams and yet equally devastating, at least for Catherwood.

Ethel Catherwood was a world class athlete endowed with beauty, if not somewhat of an icy poise.⁴⁶ There was/is some speculation that Ted Oke's interest in her was more than athletic and/or platonic. Be that as it may, imagine the pressure on a female athlete of Catherwood's calibre not to be seen for who she was, but to be seen for what the media, wanted her to be - the statuesque beauty who even was posed in a press photograph adjacent to the statue of her famed relative, Ned Hanlan.⁴⁷ She was always described a "soaring gracefully"⁴⁸ over the high jump bar. Although 1928 represents a coming-out of women (or their coming-in) into sport, the media was not ready and I cannot imagine what it would be like for Catherwood to remain proud of her athleticism behind the pretty mask the media made her wear. Did she reach her breaking point when it was suggested that she become a movie actress? She stated quite bluntly, "I'd rather gulp poison than try my hand at motion pictures."⁴⁹ The 18 year old gold medallist frequently was reported to carry a rag doll and a ukelele. When singled out by the press in Canada, she often "shrank back in some confusion"⁵⁰ and shunned the limelight. When she left Canada, Catherwood left Teddy Oak, Walter Knox, sport, Canada and the media for good. When she died on 26 September 1987 in Grass Valley, California, her death went unnoticed - another un-hero/ine - in all of the major Canadian newspapers," somehow finalizing her divorce from sport and its attendant media.

Grace without pressure in high performance sport would appear from this discussion to be part of the "benign illusion" that is sport. "Canada's" scintillating performance at the 1928 Olympic Games was exacted with heavy price for at least two of its most outstanding athletes. There is a very famous two-line dialogue between Galileo and Andreano that I've always liked:

Andreano: Unhappy the land that has no heroes.

Galileo: No, unhappy the land that needs them.

Williams' and Catherwood's responses to media aggrandizement and hero-building is a lesson to sport and its devotees even today.

NOTES

1. P. Goodhart and C. Chataway, War Without Weapons (London: W.H. Allen, 1968), p.11.
2. R.M. Goodhue, "The Development of Olympism, 1900-1932; Technical Success Within a Threatening Political Reality" in P.J. Graham and H. Ueberhorst, The Modern Olympics (West Point, N.Y.: Leisure Press, 1976), pp. 42-43.

- 3 . B. Henry, An Approved History of the Olympic Games (California: Alfred Publishing Co., 1984), p. 134.
- 4 . Goodhue, "The Development of Olympism," p. 42.
- 5 . "Canada", through Dr. AS. Lamb and the Canadian Olympic Committee did not vote in favour of women participating in the Olympic Games.
- 6 . D. Morrow, "Newspapers: Selected Aspects of Canadian Sport Journalism and the Olympics" in The Olympic Movement and the Mass Media (Calgary: Hurford Enterprises Ltd., 1989), pp. 2-13.
- 7 . Toronto Telegram (TT), 2 August 1928.
- 8 . Toronto Daily Star, (TDS) 31 July, 1928.
- 9 . Reprinted in The Winnipeg Free Press, (WFP) 7 August 1928.
- 10 . TDS, 31 July 1928.
- 11 . Montreal Daily Star (MDS), 9 August 1928.
- 12 . Ibid., emphasis mine.
- 13 . Twelfth Night, V.i. 382-383.
- 14 . TDS, 4 September 1928.
- 15 . Various Canadian press headlines from late July to early August 1928.
- 16 . Vancouver Sun (VS), 30 July 1928.
- 17 . MacLean's Magazine, 24 November 1956.
- 18 . Ibid.
- 19 . Ibid.
- 20 . Montreal Gazette, (MG) 31 July 1928.
- 21 . TDS, 2 August 1928.
- 22 . MacLean's 24 November 1956.
- 23 . VS, 7 September 1928.
- 24 . TT, 31 July 1928.
- 25 . VS, 29 November 1982.
- 26 . Ibid.

27. See, for example, H. Lenskyj, Out of Bounds (Toronto: Women's Press, 1986).
28. Cited in D. McDonald and L. Drewery, Canada's Greatest Women Athletes (Rexdale: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 1981), p. 26.
29. Regina Leader-Post (L-p), 7 September 1926.
30. McDonald and Drewery, Canada's Greatest Women Athletes, p. 25.
31. B. Ferguson, Who's Who in Canadian Sport (Toronto: Summerhill Press Ltd., 1985) p. 138.
32. Ottawa Citizen (OC), 3 July 1928.
33. TDS, 3 August 1928.
34. Ibid., 7 August 1928
35. Ibid.
36. MDS, 7 August 1928.
37. WFP, 4 August 1928, emphasis mine.
38. CH, 30 July 1928.
39. CH, 30 July 1928.
40. Toronto Globe and Mail (G & M), 6 August 1928.
41. Toronto Life Magazine, May 1980, p. 15.
42. Ibid.
43. TDS, 28 August 1928.
44. MDS and TDS, 28 August 1928.
45. L-P, 6 August 1928.
46. F. Cosentino and G. Leyshon, Olympic Gold (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winathon of Canada Ltd., 1975), p. 83.
47. TDS, 9 August 1928.
48. For example, L-P, 7 September 1926 and G & M, 27 August 1928.
49. D. Wallechinsky, The Complete Book of the Olympics (New York: Viking Press, 1984).
50. MG, 27 August 1928 and G&M, 27 August 1928.

51. Bob Ferguson does not even list Catherwood's name in either edition of Who's Who in Canadian Sport.