

Laura Thomas
University of British Columbia

Twentieth-Century Mermaids : **Synchronized Swimming in the Canadian** **Imagination, 1948-1996**

Hold your breath and run, skate, or dribble. Work as fast and as hard as you can to reach the finish line, home base, the net or the basket. Hold your breath and go all out. Now imagine yourself in water. Your arms and legs are in constant motion, sculling and kicking to keep your body afloat. Your body flexes, arches, and snaps into pose after pose. Your movement appears effortless, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Have I just described a masculine sport? Is this a sport akin to baseball, hockey, basketball, or football? Yes and no; yes because it demands power, speed, and strength, and no because grace, charm, and beauty are also part of the effort.

Synchronized swimming developed in conjunction with the North American lifesaving programs of the early twentieth-century as a means to test the endurance of lifeguards, and a recreational and artistic alternative to often-tedious lap swimming. It has since evolved into a physically demanding and highly competitive sport at which Canadian women have excelled. Despite their success, however, synchronized swimmers remain at the margins of the Canadian sporting conscious. While representations of female speed swimmers have changed from 'bathing beauties' to 'aquatic jocks', media and scholarly representations of synchronized swimmer remain in the mythical world of mermaids and water nymphs. This paper attempts to understand the construction of the highly sexualized mermaid-synchronized swimmer by examining representations of synchronized swimmer in Canadian magazines.

The tendency in the Canadian conscious to conceive of synchronized swimmers as 'bathing beauties' has led the sport media and sport scholars to trivialize the athletic achievement of synchronized swimmers. For example, Susan Cahn in and Helen Lenskij provide a critical feminist analysis of the media's male gaze on female athletes, but they ignore female dominated games in general, and synchronized swimming in particular. And Jennifer Hargreaves argues that while the inclusion of exclusively female sport such as synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics in the 1984 Olympics may have been greeted as a victory, it only confirmed gender-based associations. This statement is problematic for two reasons. It assumes that the movement of women into traditionally male sport is a more important feminist project than promoting female-dominant sports like synchronized swimming, and it assumes that synchronized swimming reproduces

the oppression of women without somehow offering up its own brand of resistance. That synchronized swimmers are legitimate sportswomen in their own right is subsumed by the assumption that they are too feminine, or sexual, in their appearance to be true athletes.

This study analyzes representations of synchronized swimmers in popular Canadian magazines between 1948, when synchronized swimming was a demonstration sport in the Olympics, and 1996 when it made its fourth appearance as an official Olympic event. The magazines include *Canadian*, *enRoute*, *Chalelaine*, *Reader's Digest (Canadian)*, *Time (Canadian Edition)*, and *Maclean's*.

By increasing our knowledge of the primacy given in generalist magazines to the feminine qualities of synchronized swimming we can reevaluate our understanding of the sport's marginal status in the sport media and in sport scholarship. As Synthia Sydnor writes, the sport continues to be thought of as "poetry in motion-beauty-elegance-music-culture-athleticism." As a result, synchronized swimmers are imagined as beautiful, (hetero)sexually charged women first and as athletes last.