

Legitimation and Limitations: How the Opie Report on Women's Gymnastics Missed its Mark

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Women's gymnastics has been a troubled sport over recent years with the death or injury of several top-ranking gymnasts and reports that many participants were plagued with eating disorders.¹ Australia has not been immune to such problems. In the wake of accusations of abuse of gymnasts in the Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) program at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in 1995 and a lawsuit against the Australian Sports Commission² by a former AIS gymnast, who alleged that the training regime at the AIS had caused her to suffer from Anorexia nervosa, the Federal Government set up an Inquiry to look into allegations of abuse in the WAG program. The Inquiry itself was problematic in that it was set an extremely narrow framework of investigation. The terms of reference were: to examine complaints made in relation to the treatment of young female gymnasts at the AIS; to assess whether the complaints were substantiated and whether the conduct and practices which were the subject of the complaints had been appropriate; and to recommend any relevant and necessary changes to the operation of the AIS gymnastics program.

The Opie Inquiry

The framers and the author of the Inquiry appear to have accepted the historical baggage and conventional practices within elite women's gymnastics which, I would argue, were largely at the root of the troubles. Moreover, the Inquiry did not question the practice of young children carrying such high hopes and the implications of this practice on their later life.

Adam Ashforth has argued that commissions of inquiry play a major role in legitimation of existing practices³ and it will be suggested that legitimation was a primary reason for establishing the Independent Inquiry into Women's Artistic Gymnastics at the AIS, headed by sports lawyer, Hayden Opie. The terms of reference laid down for any inquiry will play

an important role in influencing its findings in that the appointed investigator is obliged to operate within the framework of inquiry set up. This proved to be the case with the Opie Report, which basically legitimised the form and ramifications of the sport and the philosophic guidelines that underpinned it. The Opie Report gave a nod of approval to those who were administering the WAG program and justified the substantial Federal Government funding. By sticking meticulously to the legalities, Opie missed many of the more subtle occurrences, which had originally upset parents.

When problems arise in a state-organised sporting structure⁴ there are several groups whose interests lie primarily in containing the situation and reassuring the community that the overall policy direction and administration of the sport are appropriate. The government secures a considerable boost to its image by supporting and overseeing elite sports programs, especially those that involve high-profile Olympic athletes that may produce medals in international competition. Expenditure must be seen to be effective, well-directed and properly apportioned. The administrators and coaching staff at the funded institutes, such as the AIS, obviously gain advantage from the funding and cannot help but enter into a symbiotic relationship with the government whereby each party needs the confidence and support of the other towards the same medal-focussed goals. If a sports bureaucracy fails to live up to the high expectations of the government and the public, it will bring discredit both on itself and the government. The Australian Gymnastics Federation (AGF) is another interested party because it benefits from gymnastics being one of the ordained sports at the AIS. Any problems within the sport itself can jeopardise its continuing inclusion because there is stiff competition for Federal funds and for the imprimatur of the AIS. Clearly, it is in the interests of any sporting federation such as the AGF to minimise bad publicity. All parties involved in the sport of gymnastics had an interest in containing any perceived problems that might threaten the sport.

It is hardly surprising, given this context and the brief in question, that the Opie Report concentrated on specific allegations and failed to delve into the broader picture that would have revealed the deeper problems largely inherent in the organisation of the sport itself. Because the Opie Report largely missed this point, it did not provide a strategy for ending the issues that produced the conflict surrounding the women's

gymnastics program. This is notwithstanding some measures taken since the report such as the appointment of a new national women's coach, Peggy Liddick, who projects a warmer and more conciliatory image than was previously associated with the program and signals that the top-level gymnasts may come from institutes other than the AIS. It is not known if and to what extent Liddick's appointment may have been made to enhance the program's image and perhaps even retreat from the uncompromising chase for medals which, arguably, landed it in many of the problems which resulted in the Opie Inquiry being established. It is unlikely that she was appointed purely for her gymnastics credentials.

This article seeks to identify some structural problems facing women's gymnastics and to set them in a broader social context. It will tease out two arenas of conflict: firstly, within the sport of women's gymnastics itself; and secondly, the terrain between national perceptions of Australia as a sporting nation and the demands for these images to be translated into Olympic medals. Before discussing these factors, there will be a brief historical overview of the goals and methods of the AIS gymnastics program along with identification of the symptoms of trouble.

AIS Accolades: the 'Success' Behind the Trouble

Many of the problems faced by gymnastics at the AIS represent the downside of the gymnastics program. The events of 1995 had their seeds in the early 1980s when the AIS was given a brief to bring gymnastics in Australia out of the wilderness and make it highly competitive at the elite level. With the generous funds provided, the AGF opted to promote women's artistic gymnastics ahead of rhythmic gymnastics and men's artistic gymnastics. WAG became the flagship of Australia's international gymnastics.

This decision to favour women's gymnastics broke with a traditional tendency to put men's sport first, considering women's sport to be less serious and of inferior status. It was ironic, however, that the sport of women's gymnastics perpetuated a traditional feminine notion of women's sport. The female gymnastic body was represented as both entertaining, aesthetic and something to be admired. Elsewhere I describe how gymnastics has emphasised strong gender differentiation, with apparatus, costumes, judging criteria and description, perceptions and expectations of male and female gymnasts being starkly different, even though many of the elements of each branch remain the same and draw on the same principles of physics.⁵

The appointment of highly-credentialed Chinese gymnastics coach Tian Ju Ping as head coach of the WAG program at the AIS in 1985 was an important step in the pursuit of excellence by Australian gymnastics. Because she unquestionably used extremely rigorous (and successful) training methods she became a focal point for criticisms of the AIS gymnastic program. Under her coaching regimen gymnasts were expected to train between 40 and 44 hours a week for however many years they were at the Institute, as well as doing their school studies.⁶ Training was intensive — as no doubt it still is — and Ju Ping was uncompromising in her demands.

While in the position of Executive Director of the AGF, Peggy Browne admitted that international colleagues had criticised Ju Ping for driving her charges too hard. However, Browne defended Ju Ping's methods, claiming 'these girls are mature teenagers and this is a democratic country. If it [the program] were too tough they would leave.'⁷ This reflects the mindset of gymnastics officials that at the elite level all agents are free and equal and that the marketplace is the legitimate enforcer of what is proper. This view was echoed by William A Sands, a former gymnastics coach in the USA:

... gymnasts are free to join and leave gymnastics clubs at the gymnast's and/or parent's discretion. No one is conscripted into gymnastics training and performance ... As with any private business, the patrons are free to frequent the business or to 'vote with their feet' and go elsewhere.⁸

'Shopping round' is not really possible at top level in Australia for those selected to represent the country are expected to train at the AIS, or at least at their state institutes. However, the range of elite gymnastics clubs on offer 'in the marketplace' in the USA has certainly not protected female gymnasts from the risks and problems associated with the sport. If anything, it may have served them more poorly and with less scrutiny. Many top US coaches place more emphasis on achieving 'best coach status than concern with the interests of their athletes.

Not all the gymnasts at the AIS are as mature as Browne has suggested. Some begin training there at age nine. All athletes risk having their maturity compromised by the allure of gymnastic success. The seductive dreams of following in the footsteps of such successful Australian gymnasts as Monique Allen, joining an Olympic team and even winning medals, are often unfulfilled. Young gymnasts are not in an ideal position

to judge whether the demands of training, including rigid weight control, are in their best interests.

It is simplistic to claim that young athletes can leave gymnastics if they want to, especially in an environment where 'quitters' are seen as losers — those who didn't have the right mettle, 'proper' attitude and who didn't hunger sufficiently for success. The more investment in the sport, along with sacrifices made, the more difficult it is to leave the program.

Sports journalist Joan Ryan's expose of US female elite gymnasts demonstrated that many become disenchanted with the demands of their sport. However, she added that they were heavily pressured to continue because a structure of hopes had been built, making it difficult for athletes to extricate themselves.⁹ Otilia Gomez, the mother of an elite US gymnast who broke her neck during a vault and died three years later, explained that even parents can become mesmerised by the lure: '... as a parent, you become so involved in it you just can't see the whole picture. You're only seeing what you want to see.'¹⁰

It is misguided to blame personalities such as Ju Ping, because her methods and dedication to improving the standing of Australian gymnastics mesh precisely with the objectives of the AIS. It is also true that Ju Ping is by no means the only coach considered by some to be far too tough on trainees. Despite Ju Ping's outbursts, which led to one gymnast writing in her diary that Ju Ping was a 'raving lunatic, totally psycho',¹¹ this coach might appear 'soft' in comparison with Bela Karolyi, arguably the world's most 'successful' WAG coach in terms of output of champions. Karolyi coached the Olympic and world champion Nadia Comaneci in Romania before defecting to the USA and 'producing' further champions. He demands the toughest physical training of gymnasts. He also uses elaborate psychological taunting, selecting favourites and playing his elite squad members off against each other, to extract maximum results.¹² Ju Ping, by contrast, is not claimed to have employed similar psychological games as part of her coaching techniques.

Because young elite gymnasts spend so much of their time at training, the views of their coaches and gymnastic peers play a huge role in their self-esteem. One of Karolyi's ex-gymnasts said: 'You would do anything for that smile, that pat on the head [from Karolyi]'.¹³ Peter Donnelly has demonstrated how athlete-coach relationships, especially where children are involved, can be sites for domination and unhealthy levels of

dependency,¹⁴ which influence young gymnasts to seek the approval of coaches at almost any cost.

It is not the particular coaching techniques of Ju Ping that warrant examination as much as the institutionalised adherence by AIS administrators to the principles and competitive requirements of the sport. If the AIS aspires to reach the standards set by coaches such as Karolyi — whose proteges reap a rich haul of medals — then the AIS risks taking on board, sooner or later, some of those more questionable strategies for success. Australia's adherence to the 'international women's gymnastics model' implies that it accepts that model for success and all that it entails.

While the issues are complex, the competitive results enjoyed by Australia's female gymnasts in a short period of years have been phenomenal and the quick rise possibly unmatched by any other sport in this country. The ambitious goal set for Australian women's gymnastics in the early days of the program was to finish between thirteenth and fifteenth place at the World Gymnastics Championships in Indianapolis in 1992. The aim for 2000 was to lift the team into the world's top ten.¹⁵

The program has exceeded all expectations. To the amazement of the international gymnastic community, the Australian women's team finished in sixth place at Indianapolis. The team earned full team representation at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 where they finished seventh demonstrating that their previous performance had been no fluke. In Atlanta the team placed tenth. However, impressive achievements at Olympiads came at some cost.

Accusations of Abuse: Symptoms of Deeper Trouble

In gymnastics — and no doubt in many sports at elite level — there is a blurred zone between training that is rigorous and demanding and coaching that is abusive. There is particular reason for concern in elite women's gymnastics because many of the trainees at the AIS are children and may therefore not be in a sound position to make appropriate decisions about the coaching program. Donnelly has argued that there are many similar characteristics between child labour and children's involvement in high performance sport. Some of the concerns which might apply to both include working long hours at an early age, considerable physical, social and psychological strain and sometimes on repetitive tasks which might stunt the child's social and psychological development.¹⁶

The AIS makes stringent demands not only of the gymnasts but also of their families. It was the initial practice to develop a centralised program. Young gymnasts identified as Olympic prospects were expected to relocate to the AIS and their families encouraged to join them in Canberra. Not surprisingly, many families were unable or unwilling to make this sacrifice. There was also the problem that if a young gymnast did not live up to expectations of her, she could make a quick exit from the program, resulting in little gain for the disruption caused to the family. There was much public dissatisfaction with the centralisation of the gymnastics program. It was a policy strongly supported by Ju Ping who claimed that anything less than centralisation was 'wrong'. She claimed after the 1996 Olympics that an unwillingness to pursue the centralisation program as vigorously as she would have wished cost Australian female gymnasts a higher spot in the overall results. 'I want more kids in Australia eight to ten years old training — the best 36 at least together for four years, training', she said.¹⁷ There was the threat of financial sanctions in 1995 that those who would not move their best prospects to Canberra risked forfeiting their share of Federal funding for gymnastics.¹⁸ Since the Opie Report, the appointment of a national women's coach based in Melbourne to work with gymnasts from all institutes across the country could be interpreted as recognition that such centralisation as Ju Ping wanted was asking too much of gymnasts and their families.

Initially the tensions that existed at the AIS were downplayed and even excused. When accusations of abuse came from some parents, the AIS tried to dismiss them as simply a strategy in the struggle against centralisation — this was unlikely to be the case, even though concerns about the two issues clearly converged. Parents were rightly concerned both about having their children living apart from the family and the level of commitment their child would be expected to make — and whatever form of enforcement that might require. There were also reports that gymnasts had their rooms ransacked and that there had been a special meeting where young gymnasts had been warned not to tell their parents what was happening at the AIS. Any gymnast who did so could be expected to suffer through the 'payback system'.¹⁹ The Institute denied these allegations. There was a conflict between the two roles of the Institute: its charge to maximise Australia's medal chances and, at the same time, its responsibility for the welfare of the young gymnasts living at the Institute.

To its credit, the AIS appears to have since modified its centralist policy to give some weight to its role in decentralisation as outlined by John Daly who claims that the AIS had the dual task of bringing athletes together and also exporting the skills developed there to elite athletes training elsewhere.²⁰ It recognised that coercion can reduce the level of parental support and confidence which is essential to motivate young gymnasts to achieve their sporting goals.

Other allegations considered by the Inquiry included hitting, smacking, chair-throwing, kicking, rough handling, abusive language, intimidation, inadequate medical care, denial of access to medical care and to sports psychology, restrictions on taking water, harsh training methods, infliction of serious harm and gymnasts being forced to train or compete while ill or injured. The vast majority of these allegations were dismissed, including eighteen allegations of gymnasts training while injured or ill. However, it is well-known that gymnasts not only at the AIS but at other elite sport institutions, including state institutes in Australia, continue to train despite injury and illness. During her career, top-level gymnast Joanna Hughes from the Victorian Institute of Sport had numerous injuries, few of which stopped her training. Her stoicism has been noted in the press: 'She was in a plaster cast and on crutches for two weeks, in a lighter cast for a week after that, but still not out of training'. With the 1994 Commonwealth Games approaching, she simply changed her routines to accommodate her injuries somewhat, commenting that '... it hurts to jump a lot'. (Unfortunately, there is much jumping in gymnastics!) It was reported that Hughes continued with her plans for the 1994 Commonwealth Games because, at sixteen, she was 'running out of competitive years ... With her ankles heavily strapped, she has trained through the pain to compete at the Games ...'²¹

Such practices are widespread in international gymnastics, both for men and women, though the 'use-by-date' for males occurs later. Joan Ryan claimed that US gymnasts were forced to continue strenuous training even with serious injuries such as fractures, with anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving drugs being used to allow this.²² That explains why Karolyi's pupil Chelle Stack competed in a competition with two broken toes.²³ One US gymnastics official has claimed that Karolyi's gymnasts would often have to seek clandestine medical treatment, so opposed was Karolyi to gymnasts focussing on their injuries. 'With or without injury they have to compete', Karolyi stated.²⁴

According to Adrienne Blue, performing in spite of injuries is also common among British gymnasts²⁵ and probably the case in any country that takes gymnastics 'seriously'. When US 1984 Olympic champion Mary Lou Retton broke her wrist she was told she should have the cast on for eight to twelve weeks. 'But when you have big competitions coming up, you're not going to stay out that long. I got the cast off in four weeks,' she said.²⁶

Other allegations against the AIS involve attempts to keep the gymnasts as 'light' as possible. Coach Ju Ping, who monitors closely the diet of her gymnasts stated that 'They do not come here for eating'.²⁷ There have been allegations that gymnasts practised weight loss techniques, being taught how to 'throw up' even after a normal meal and shedding weight in the sauna. While the Opie Inquiry found that there had been inappropriate use of the sauna and recommended that a protocol should be established for its use, it did not question the practice of weight minimisation. The Inquiry focused primarily on specific allegations and did not address why such a sporting culture, which spawned questionable coaching practices, emerged and flourished at the AIS.

This leads to the next event which made 1995 the '*annus horribilis*' for the AIS, the lodging of a lawsuit by a former gymnast at the Institute. The gymnast claimed that AIS training methods caused her to suffer from Anorexia nervosa.²⁸ She was one of many elite gymnasts in Australia and other countries who suffered eating disorders related to this sport. It is precisely for this reason that the Opie Inquiry should have realised that the demands for weight minimisation were 'part and parcel' of women's gymnastics. The Report failed to confront such wider issues that were symptomatic of the direction of the sport. The thrust of the Opie Report was to curb the excesses within the sport. It did not question the operating framework.

Stepping Lightly on Issues of Weight

Administrators of the AIS gymnastics program suggested to the Opie Inquiry that there were three fundamental reasons why gymnasts needed to be kept lightweight. Firstly, the power-to-weight ratio of a gymnast which would allow her to have a better chance to perform advanced skills if her fat level was kept significantly down; secondly, the safety aspect whereby less stress is placed on bodies if they are lighter; and, thirdly, a need for constancy because it was claimed that sudden variations in body

weight could affect motor skills and thus alter the mechanical precision that is required for execution of these skills.²⁹ In terms of pure physics, all of these claims have some basis, yet gymnastics are more than a matter of physics. The Opie Inquiry should have considered whether issues of physics may sometimes conflict with basic biological requirements. There are also important social factors — matters of self-esteem, relationships between gymnasts, families, coaches and peers and other related pressures. The Opie Inquiry accepted these ‘needs’ for gymnasts to be lightweight as reasonable. According to the report, ‘... if weight is inherently an important consideration in the sport, the conduct and practices of the AIS must be judged in that light ... the issue for the inquiry is whether the AIS manages issues of weight relating to the gymnasts in an appropriate manner ...’³⁰

This surely raises the question ‘appropriate for what?’ On one hand, ‘appropriate’ might pertain to the interests of gymnasts, such as, what are the most appropriate methods of training and training structures for gymnasts, in the short and long term for their physical, emotional and other needs. However, ‘appropriate’ might also refer to the sporting reputation of Australia and another question could be posed: what methods of training and training structures would optimise Australia’s medal chances in gymnastics while fitting within the standards laid down by other nations vying for Olympic medals in women’s gymnastics? The Inquiry focused more on this second definition. There is a third approach to the issue of ‘application’: what demands are appropriate for young gymnasts, given the cultural context pertaining to childhood in Australia?

The Opie Report assumed without question that gymnasts needed to be slim and that it was reasonable for the AIS to show concern about this and to devise methods of enforcement. This accorded with the broader context of international gymnastics. Standards in the sport walk the most questionable line between female gymnasts being so lightweight that certain difficult skills can be achieved and the point where diminished health and energy levels reduce the prospects of excellent performance. It is the young gymnasts, rather than the coaches, who bear the brunt of this competition. One top-level gymnast, Christie Henrich, died in 1994 of multiple organ failure caused by anorexia and bulimia.³¹ During an international event when Henrich was just fifteen years old, she had been told by a judge that she would not make the US Olympic team unless she

lost weight.³² Numerous other US elite gymnasts who have suffered from eating disorders include Kathy Rigby, Michelle Hirse, Chelle Stack, Kristie Phillips and Erica Stokes, the former four all trainees under Bela Karolyi.³³

Olympic medallist Kathy Johnson also suffered from bulimia and was 25 before she had her first menstrual period.³⁴ At least one Australian gymnast did not go through puberty until the age of eighteen and Olga Korbut was 19 at puberty.³⁵ Menstruation is often delayed in elite gymnasts and in many women who are significantly underweight. It is the body's response to starvation, directing all possible energy to the task of keeping essential systems going. If the body is striving for the most efficient use of what amounts to inadequate nourishment, harm may result. Gymnasts whose puberty is delayed by their diet and or heavy training regime face growth and bone density problems.³⁶ They also face problems relating to insufficient intake of a variety of the relevant vitamins, minerals and even calories, if their diets are inadequate. Studies of female gymnasts in California showed that 40 per cent of them were eating less than two-thirds of the recommended daily allowance of calcium, vitamin B6, iron, folate and zinc, all of which are essential for normal growth, development and tissue repair.³⁷

Weight disorders that are rife among female gymnasts can jeopardise not only the health but also the sporting chances of the gymnasts. Several elite gymnasts in the US at least have had their careers cut short by their sapped energy, diminished health and the increased injuries that arise from their emaciated condition. Yet still the retardation of puberty is seen as a benefit, avoiding 'unnecessary' body weight on hips and breasts.

Drugs are one means of hormonal manipulation by which puberty can be staved off. However, those in charge of the long-successful Soviet gymnastics program, before the demise of the Soviet Union, were adamant that drugs were not necessary. They insisted that keeping a young gymnast's body fat below 7 per cent of body weight was sufficient to stave off puberty. Some gymnasts have body fat percentages much lower than this, although the body weight of most teenage girls is said to be about 20 per cent.³⁸ Keeping the gymnasts in rigorous training and within prescribed weight limits therefore has the added 'advantage' of delaying puberty, but there are broader and deeper reasons for the hunger for slimness in gymnastics,

The Opie Report did acknowledge, though hardly tackled, the aesthetic reasons for gymnasts to be kept slim: it merely noted that 'it is claimed

that leaner gymnasts look better and give a “cleaner line”.³⁹ The decided preference for light gymnasts is exacerbated by media-inspired images of ‘perfect’ women as being exceedingly thin. Though the bodies of elite gymnasts are a far cry from those of models — the former usually being very short and the latter very tall — gymnasts are expected to share the culturally revered characteristic of slimness. While it is difficult to influence height (except by means of delaying puberty), weight control can be practised by women who wish to pursue a career in gymnastics. Elite gymnasts are trained to be uncompromising in the quest for perfection. Dangling an unrealistic and dangerous model of perfection in front of young gymnasts is an unhealthy preoccupation.

The demand for slimness in gymnastics is not simply a technical demand, but a cultural one which has become more pronounced as women’s gymnastics has developed a higher media profile. Elite female gymnasts dedicate their bodies to the spectacle that is their sport. They strive not only for technical perfection but also to be aesthetically pleasing to judges and audiences alike.

Weight, which has had a significant focus in the WAG program at the AIS, cannot be extricated from the aesthetic aspects of slimness and associated cultural codings for women and even girls. There is one story of a gymnast who detested the weighing ritual at the AIS to such an extent that, fearing a weight increase, she deliberately broke the electronic scales.⁴⁰ Under Ju Ping, gymnasts at the AIS have been generally weighed daily, less often in the case of the youngest gymnasts and perhaps twice a day for the more mature gymnasts or for those considered more prone to being ‘overweight’.⁴¹ The term ‘overweight’ here is, of course, relative. It was demonstrated in the Opie Report that AIS coaches addressed problems of gymnasts putting on weight — and we are here talking about amounts as small as half a kilogram — by reprimands, counselling, exercise and stringent overseeing of diet.⁴²

Among the methods used to keep gymnasts within a desired weight range are techniques such as humiliating the young gymnasts about any weight gain. There is a common acceptance in women’s gymnastics that fat, even in the most scanty form, is evil. If the AIS adheres to that belief — and commitment to gymnastic excellence as it is understood in international competitive women’s gymnastics virtually guarantees adherence — their gymnasts are at risk of being kept as much as possible in a physical state of girlhood.

Women's Gymnastics as Expression of Separate Spheres

There is no equivalent aesthetic or 'slim' requirement for male gymnasts whose skills and technical accomplishment alone determine their success in the sport. This difference reflects the separate spheres in which women's and men's gymnastics operate.

The stark differences between women's and men's gymnastics, clearly marked in contemporary images around gender, have deep historical roots. However, some of the differences can be positively identified as having been consolidated in the post-World War II period at a time when the governments of many countries sought to extract the bulk of women from the workforce and ensconce them in domestic situations with clearly delineated responsibilities for family sustenance and commodity consumption. This ideological shift relied heavily on a belief that women were intrinsically different from men and that their domestic role was not dictated by government or capitalism but by nature.

The notion of clear and unarguable differences in the nature and role of women and men was strongly supported by the burgeoning advertising industry and by television and women's magazines that played a crucial part in 'naturalisation' of women's prescribed role. Its impact was widespread and seen, among other places, in the rationale put forward by administrators in women's gymnastics. The most legitimate means by which women could claim a sport for themselves and to provide justification for women's participation in it was to claim that women's gymnastics was an expression of the differences between men and women. It fitted comfortably in the sphere outlined for women. German gymnastics official Sophie Dapper argued along these lines, suggesting that women's gymnastics was a means by which 'a genuine expression of the essential physical and spiritual qualities of women could be demonstrated'.⁴³

However, the debate about women's involvement in gymnastics dated back to at least 1913 when German bishops had strongly condemned public gymnastics contests and women's part in them. Concern was expressed that women's physical education and public displays might lead to 'the feminine sense of self-control [being] weakened, and the aptitude for quiet domestic labor lessened'.⁴⁴ At least some of these attitudes carried over into the development of the women's individual events selected to be part of the Olympic gymnastics program during the 1950s.

It is interesting to note that there was considerable disagreement between Western and Eastern Bloc gymnastics administrations about the

direction for women's gymnastics. Dapper and those who shared her views were at pains to emphasise gendered differences, which was not such a focus of gymnasts in the Eastern Bloc where women were essential members of the workforce and where the domestic roles for them were not so imperative. This is not to suggest that Soviet women did not have their own problems with regard to the Soviet brand of sexism or that the Soviet women did not exploit female gymnasts in its own way. In their attention to the biomechanical aspects of the sport, the Soviet Union may well have started the trend towards smaller and lighter girls for gymnastics.

The Opie Report did not extricate individual questions of abuse from the wider system of institutionalised inequalities, contradictions and other problems which have arisen from the deliberate attempt to root women's gymnastics in a traditional view of femininity.

Children Shouldering National Hopes

Historical, cultural and other factors therefore have combined to shape women's gymnastics and contemporary expectations of female gymnasts. Much of the discussion has focussed on gender issues but a national desire to be known through sporting prowess has also contributed to the problems. It is pertinent that, as female elite gymnasts get younger and expectations of them get greater, there is an even sharper clash with Australian images of childhood.

Ethel Turner, in *Seven Little Australians*, depicted children as having a special joyousness, rebellion and mischief.⁴⁵ Whether her claims of Australian children were real or purely imaginary, there seems little dispute that Australians prefer the idea of an unfettered and carefree childhood. This is evident in the stories about some of the leading national sporting icons. Dawn Fraser reputedly took up competitive swimming at a relatively late age after being dared to swim faster than those she was teasing. Don Bradman spent hours hitting a golf ball with a cricket stump against the corrugated iron water tank in his back yard, honing his cricket skills in his own way. There is no carefree childhood for Australia's new gymnastics stars. This is why the allegations of abuse at the AIS were damaging the reputation of its WAG program, with it becoming known that children there were training harder than was generally felt to be consistent with Australian childhood.

Some have contended that children can benefit from being sports stars, but this argument can be overstated. Mary Lou Retton, for instance, claimed that the travel she did as a young teenager compensated

adequately for her missing out on a 'normal childhood'.⁴⁶ However, complaints were made to the Opie Inquiry about the restrictions on travel and movement when overseas: the limited opportunities for meeting other people or even taking part in events such as the opening ceremony march. The Australian female gymnasts for instance were unable to join the opening ceremony of the 1994 Commonwealth Games. According to coach Warwick Forbes, the coaches had decided '... that it was in the best interests to achieve our goals if we did not expose them to the excitement and the exhilaration that occurs at an opening ceremony and in fact can drain the athletes ...' John Hughes, father of Australian gymnast Joanna Hughes, complained that female gymnasts, when not competing or training, were confined to their residential area.⁴⁷ These measures were justified, as was the banning of boyfriends — one ban which Opie recommended against — on the grounds that it is all part of taking the sport seriously.

It is also pertinent to note that as a sport becomes increasingly commercialised⁴⁸ it becomes more serious. Sponsors want to back 'winners', not just competitors.

Sport comes to take on the values of the marketplace with sportspeople becoming yet another mechanism in the grand marketing machine.

That some sportspeople might happen to be children makes little difference to corporate interests. It is because elite gymnastics is being taken so seriously that the sport is so dominated by children. Joan Ryan points out that, whereas the six US Olympic gymnasts in 1976 averaged seventeen-and-a-half years, stood five foot three-and-a-half inches and weighed 106 pounds, by 1992 the average US Olympic gymnast was sixteen years old, four feet nine inches and 83 pounds.⁴⁹ Most of their training and grooming for the Olympics took place during childhood.

Conclusions

The limited terms of reference for the Opie Inquiry determined that it would only deal with the symptoms rather than the deeper issues that plagued Australian women's gymnastics and the issues which arise from having young children in such intense training. The narrow recommendations of the Report failed to address these wider issues. The claim that reports from such inquiries serve legitimating purposes, that they 'also seek to persuade', and are 'thus rhetorical texts in the classical sense, and their rhetorical strategies need to be examined'⁵⁰ might just as easily have been written of the Opie Report specifically. The government,

the AIS and the AGF desired to push ahead with their targets and needed to placate community concerns about what was happening in the WAG program. The Opie Report effectively dismissed most allegations and made some suggestions which could be perceived as token, such as a protocol for use of the sauna, relaxations on the ban on boyfriends and the designation of a confidential counsellor. Another recommendation placed restrictions on a particular coach in the WAG program. By implication, once these reforms were implemented the problems at the AIS would be overcome.

However, it seems that the AGF and perhaps even the AIS recognised that more needed to be done than the Opie Report suggested if the WAG program was to retain any faith with parents. It is difficult to tell at this early stage whether the acquisition of a new national women's coach with a softer image reflects real changes in the WAG program and a retreat from the centralisation which Ju Ping sees as being vital to the women's gymnastics program or whether it is largely an exercise in better public relations. One promising innovation is that the weight of a gymnast is not included in the profiles of female athletes published in *The Australian Gymnast*. The future should make clearer whether this action is a token one or represents a serious change in philosophy.

William Sands claims that 'gymnasts and coaches must walk a thin tightwire between under-doing gymnastics and losing competitively to gymnasts and coaches who work harder, and overdoing gymnastics and being undone by their own overzealousness'.⁵¹ But what represents 'overzealousness' and what constitutes 'good tactics' in women's gymnastics is far from clear. What is evident is that the definitions have changed and so has the sport, now relying heavily at elite level on girls who are either prepubescent or very slightly built. Moreover, strategies that have worrying consequences have been put in place to keep them that way. Yet it appears that Opie was unwilling — or not permitted within the terms of reference — to question the basic priorities of women's gymnastics.

The sport of women's gymnastics has been recruited to advance Australia's official sporting goals and to enhance its international medal prospects. To achieve this goal girls at the AIS are being encouraged to become machines of perfection. In the process the sport has been advancing many cultural messages including the notion that slim is beautiful. While there are obvious benefits for the AGF in the AIS WAG program, there are

costs which it may wish to consider, especially if it wants to project women's gymnastics as a sport which empowers girls and women and offers them a sport with attributes other than those that appear locked in male paradigms.

The Opie Report, which focused more on legitimation than resolution, endorsed the dominant model. It failed to consider the wider context of women's gymnastics. It could not see that with the current direction of the sport, the chances for 'balance' seem increasingly thin, as do the gymnasts.

Notes:

- 1 Julissa Gomez and Christie Henrich were two elite gymnasts who died as a result of gymnastics. See the obituary to Henrich in *International Gymnast*, vol. 36, no. 10, Oct. 1994, p. 49; and Joan Ryan *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: The Making and Breaking of Elite Gymnasts and Figure Skaters*, Doubleday, New York, 1995. I would like to thank Therese Taylor, Kerrie O'Connor, Brian Martin and two anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.
- 2 The Australian Sports Commission is the wider sports bureaucracy which oversees the Australian Institute of Sport, among other sporting matters.
- 3 Adam Ashforth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation: On Commissions of Inquiry as Power/Knowledge Forms', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 3, no. 1, Mar. 1990, pp. 952-1909.
- 4 For a deeper discussion of the state's role in sport, see Jan Wright, 'Images of the Body', in J Kenway, ed., *Gender, the State and Education*, Deacon University Press, Geelong (forthcoming).
- 5 Wendy Varnay, 'Women's Gymnastics and Social Change', paper delivered at the 'Sport: the Real Level Playing Field Conference', organised by Stout Foundation, Wellington, New Zealand, Oct. 1998.
- 6 Sam North, 'Sports Visionary Sets a Tough Assignment', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Aug. 1991, p. 58.
- 7 Quoted in North, 'Sports Visionary'.
- 8 William A Sands, 'What's Wrong with Women's Gymnastics?' *The Australian Gymnast*, vol. no. 22, Spring 1995, pp. 13-14.
- 9 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*.
- 10 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 22.
- 11 Opie, op. cit., p. 330. Opie found that, on the probability of evidence, the gymnast may have been exaggerating.
- 12 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 211.
- 13 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 205
- 14 Peter Donnelly, 'Problems Associated with Youth Involvement in High-Performance Sport' in B Cahill and A Pear, eds, *Intensive Participation in Children's Sport*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, Il., 1993, pp. 105-6.
- 15 Louise Evans, 'Australian Team's Historic Win', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Dec. 1990, p. 41; Sam North, 'Sports Visionary', p. 1.
- 16 Peter Donnelly, *Child Labour, Sport Labour: Applying Child Labour Laws to Sport*, paper presented at the NASSS Conference, Sacramento, Ca., Nov. 1995.
- 17 Peter Atkinson, 'Aussie System Not Good Enough yet against Gymnastic Goliaths', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 July 1996, p. 51.

- 18 Jacquelin Magnay, 'Girl Gymnasts Brutally Treated, Say Parents', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Apr. 1995, p. 1.
- 19 Magnay, 'Girl Gymnasts'.
- 20 John A Daly, *Quest for Excellence: the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, p. 168.
- 21 Richard Hinds, 'Breaking Bodies to Make Top Grade', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Aug. 1994, pp. 39-40.
- 22 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, pp. 35-40.
- 23 Nancy Raymond, 'Chelle Stack,' *International Gymnast*, vol. 20, no. 10, p. 40.
- 24 Raymond, 'Chelle Stack', p. 209.
- 25 Adrienne Blue, *Grace Under Pressure: The Emergence of Women in Sport*, Sidgwich and Jackson, London, 1987, p. 160.
- 26 Blue, *Grace Under Pressure*, p. 161.
- 27 Roy Masters, 'Why Australia's Girl Gymnasts are Happy to Cry for Ju Ping', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1992, p. 71.
- 28 'Gymnast to Sue ASC', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1995, p. 6.
- 29 Opie, *Report*, pp. 140-1.
- 30 Opie, *Report*, p. 139.
- 31 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 94.
- 32 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 55.
- 33 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, pp. 62-3, 73.
- 34 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 91.
- 35 Kaz Cooke, 'Chewing the Body Fat', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Apr. 1995, p. 9; Olga Korbut (with Ellen Emerson-White), *My Story: the Autobiography of Olga Korbut*, Century, London, 1992, p. 110.
- 36 Blue, *Grace Under Pressure*, p. 162.
- 37 Blue, *Grace Under Pressure*, p. 155.
- 38 Blue, *Grace Under Pressure*, p. 158.
- 39 Opie, *Report*, p. 141.
- 40 Opie *Report*, p. 159.
- 41 Opie, *Report*, pp. 143-4.
- 42 Opie, *Report*, p. 145.
- 43 Cited in Frigga Haug, *Female Sexualisation*, Verso, London, 1987, p. 178.
- 44 Quoted in Allen Guttman, *Women's Sport: A History*, Columbia Uni. Press, New York, 1991, p. 203.
- 45 Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians*, Ward Lock, London, 1894, p. 7.
- 46 William Oscar Johnson, *The Olympics: A History of the Games*, Sports Illustrated, Tampa, Florida, 1992, p. 194.
- 47 Opie, *Report*, p. 341.
- 48 Wendy Varney, 'Oh What a Fleecing: Australian Sport and Commercial Spectacle', *Arena Magazine*, vol. 26, Dec. 1996/Jan. 1997, pp. 31-4.
- 49 Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, p. 65.
- 50 Ashworth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation', p. 6.
- 51 Sands, 'What's Wrong with Women's Gymnastics?', p. 17.