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In the Hands of the Coach?

Women's Interpretations of Athleticism and Their Relationships With Men as Coaches

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploratory study of a group of women athletes who have trained with male coaches at an elite level. I explore the ways these women interpret their experiences as athletes as well as the extent to which they perceive these experiences to be mediated by the men who coach them. In recognizing the woman athlete as contested terrain, I have focused on the struggle between the masculine hegemony inherent in the sport environment which has systematically contrived women's athleticism, and the power of the women themselves to accommodate, resist, and amend such structural constraints. A series of interpretive frameworks were used by the women as they negotiated their lives in sport; showing themselves as agents in a world defined by rules of the game that are written by men.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis is an exploratory study of a group of elite women athletes. My aim in undertaking this project is to explore the ways these women interpret their experiences as athletes in a male-dominated sporting world. In particular, I am interested in understanding the nature of their relationships with the men who coach them; relationships that embed a hierarchy of both position and gender. Coaches are powerful figures – as teachers, authorities, gatekeepers, and role models. What an athlete experiences “on the field” in training and competing is largely mediated by the coach. Coaches embody the expectations and traditions of the sporting world; one which simultaneously glorifies men and inscribes women as subordinate. The fact is, most coaches of elite women athletes are men.

Much current literature on women’s participation in sport emphasizes the fact of this masculine hegemony – the systematic exclusion of women from athletics, the privilege and power of men in sport, and the defining of sport as a culturally determined institution. However, beyond the focus on structural constraints in the sporting world, little attention has been given to the ways women themselves interpret their experiences or negotiate on a daily basis the terms of their participation in sport. I contend that the female sporting body needs to be presented as contested terrain. On the one hand, sport trains and coerces bodies into complying with and integrating the hierarchical power structures of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. On the other hand, however, athletes invent their own athleticism and challenge the objectification of their bodies. The contribution made by this study is to frame the issues from the perspective



of the women; athletes who share a relationship with a male coach and who adopt, resist, and amend the masculine rules of the game.

The 32 women who are the basis of the study all competed as varsity soccer, swimming, or track and field athletes at a Canadian university. Some still compete at the University of Calgary, others have continued their careers after retiring from varsity sport, and the remaining no longer train at a competitive level. By means of semi-structured interviews, I address issues highlighted in the literature on women's athleticism, as well as explore new themes which emerge from the women's stories. I try to make sense of their perceptions of themselves as athletes, and the way they assess the relationships with their male coaches. In understanding how athleticism and the athlete-coach relationship develops amidst structural constraints and the athletes' agency, I look to what meanings women athletes bring away from their sporting participation. I show the management of women's sporting bodies as a struggle over costs and rewards, where the protagonists are the woman athlete, her coach, and the world of athletics. My aim is to bring forward the athletes' experiences of this struggle.

The first step in gaining an understanding of this struggle is to review the literature on women in sport. Chapter Two looks at what has been written regarding women's entrance into sport and the systematic exclusion, marginalization, and trivialization of women's claims to athleticism. In addition, this chapter addresses the existing literature that tackles the issues of pain and injury, eating disorders, sexual harassment, as well as the potential for empowerment that sport offers. The final section of this chapter looks at the male coach and his position in the sporting world as well as

what is known (however limited) about how his relationships with women athletes have unfolded. The theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter Three frame the evolution of “gender” within feminist theorizing from the mutually exclusive and homogenous categories of men and women to the conceptualization of gender as a social construct defined within very local and historically specific contexts. Feminist theorizing in sport has followed a similar path, problematizing the insistence of the masculine sporting world on “appropriate” masculine and feminine athleticism as well as its reification of man in sport as the norm. The theoretical framework articulated in this chapter allows me to understand that women in sport face systemic resistance and subordination but also are agents active in their sporting relationships. Chapter Four moves into the methodological approach that my study has taken, addressing the implications of this structure-agency debate. Details are provided here of the sample of women in the study, and the semi-structured interview which was the source of the data. The findings are presented in Chapter Five. This chapter has been divided into two main sections; one which looks at how the women have come to define and understanding their athleticism; and the other which looks at the coach-athlete relationship through the women’s eyes. An analysis of the findings and some conclusions about the project as a whole constitute Chapter Six.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Women in the Sport World**

Contemporary literature has identified the struggles to control women's experiences in sport and the meanings of female athleticism as struggles fought almost exclusively among men. Consequently, men have constructed and defended a certain feminine identity in relation to sport. It is argued that from practices of defining the sport world as a male realm, to the direct control of women's sport by men, to the dismissal, ignoring, and trivialization of women's athleticism and achievements, women's access to sport and their attempts to define and give meaning to sport experiences have continually been opposed.

### ***Women's entrance into athletics***

The scholarship on women in sport has come to include a critical historical perspective. For example, in describing 19<sup>th</sup> century orthodoxy, Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1987) suggest that women's bodies were believed to be biologically destined to be unsuited for the rigors and expressions of athleticism. Women were held to be spiritual, virtuous, and intuitive, while at the same time physically and mentally weak. During this period, the ideal of female domesticity rooted in nurturance, morality and passivity secured the message that sport was unwomanly and that athletic participation would undermine women's immutable reproductive role in childbearing and rearing. According to Hargreaves (1994), the strength of moral and medical claims to exclusive

male athleticism and female domesticity led many women to avoid sport or exercises and consequently to become weak, ill, and submissive. As a result, this both confirmed the medical stereotype of the “fragile” female and discredited any claims to female athletic potential (Hargreaves, 1994: 44-48). Oglesby (1989) maintains that near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it became obvious that poor female health was connected to the imposed lack of exercise, gentle forms of physical activity were consequently condoned by the medical profession. However, women’s sport participation remained dependent upon their mothering role – sport was accepted *only* as an aid in childbirth and as a means of preserving and protecting women’s general health (Oglesby, 1989: 131). These authors suggest that the initial support for women in sport was simply a means to ensure women were defined by their reproductive capacities.

Beyond these medical and ethical groundings, Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1987) consider the economic forces in Europe and North America during this time as additional contributors to a limited participation by women in sport. They conclude that as the economy grew and more families began to enjoy middle class standing, increasing numbers of women were freed from an incessant struggle for subsistence and consequently discovered the possibility of going outside their household roles. More leisure made sport more accessible. This passage from the domestic world into sport is seen by Hargreaves as a way women became public symbols of their father’s or husband’s material success – “the way she organized her leisure defined his social standing” (Hargreaves, 1987: 132). Hargreaves (1987), in noting that women were usually adorned with extravagant and physically incapacitating clothes and were often

bound by a code of behavior “proper” for women, presents the female athletes’ experiences of sport as a training ground for the continuance of their subordinate and domestic positions. In her later work, *Sporting Females*, Hargreaves claims that women were characterized as suitable for such sports as Swedish gymnastics because of its preoccupation with discipline, its military drill associations, and its denial of free and sensual movement, and for tennis which was deemed to be a courting arena through which men could observe potential partners in a ladylike game of “pat-ball” (Hargreaves, 1994: 54). Hargreaves goes on to say that women’s sport was intended to express “[l]oyalty, cooperation, smartness, cleanliness, fairness, self-control, and respect for authority” rather than strength, aggression, and competitiveness (Hargreaves, 1994: 111).

Messner (1992) echoes the same reasoning, contending that by the early decades of the 1900s, caution still surrounded even the most “feminine” and restricted of women’s sport participation. Sharp criticism was directed against “inappropriate” (intense or masculinizing) physical activity as being debilitating for motherhood and a factor in the destruction of the feminine physique (Messner, 1992:16). Burton-Nelson (1994) illustrates this resistance with her look at women’s bicycle riding during this time, explaining that where women saw the activity as more than conditioning for motherhood and rather sought its liberating potential, the medical profession with an apparent noble concern for women, reacted by claiming bicycle seats “induce[d] menstruation and cause[d] contracted vaginas and collapsed uteri” (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 16). What these authors see is an invention of biological hazards exclusive to women that translated into most sport clubs denying women full membership; the reduction of female tennis

matches from best-of-five to best-of-three sets; women's rowing being judged on form and grace not speed; and the maintenance of men's monopoly over resources in university sport programs. Sport sociologists view as significant the fact that the exclusively male International Olympic Committee (IOC) refused female athletes entry to the Olympic Games for more than 30 years; only after growing pressure were women allowed to participate in the 1928 Olympics on a restricted program. In essence what is theorized is that as men consistently appropriated sport and its potential for aggression, intensity, and self-empowerment, sport for women became part of the process by which "female" and "other" became inextricably linked.

Sport sociologists have further noted that despite this resistance, women's athletics blossomed in the 1900s with increased involvement, improved skill, the adoption of physical education programs for women in school, the inauguration of national and international sport associations for women, and the growth of competitive programs. To account for this growth, authors have pointed to the insular nature of women's sport. Fletcher (1987) looks at the organization of colleges of physical training for women which came years before similar male versions, while Theberge (1988) and Hargreaves (1994) examine the feminine transformations of sport which included a modified version of men's basketball that was slower and more restricted, race lengths that were shortened, and the encouragement of the philosophy of "activity for all" (Theberge, 1988: 4; Hargreaves, 1994: 215). And while critics could argue that these alterations of sport were not "real" sport and simply reflected the need for different activities for weaker females, these authors hold that female athleticism was able to

develop because it remained on the outside of direct comparisons and challenges to male sport. Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg highlight another factor contributing to the growth of women's sport involvement: the influx of women into higher education. This growth occurred despite the beliefs that "the brain and ovary could not develop at the same time" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 1987: 19) and that the fixed energy capacity of women intended for the development of procreative functions was deleteriously drained by formal learning. In this vein, Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1987) assert that the authorities responded to women's increasing attendance at colleges and universities by tempering education with a restorative emphasis on physical education that would condition women for their maternal duties. What this literature suggests is that women's entrance into sport never seemed to be for sport itself; that it was neither legitimate nor inclusionary but rather manipulated by authorities claiming the right to define "feminine" and "sport".

For Hargreaves (1994), this resistance to women's claims to athleticism has continued through to present day. She argues that women are *still* systematically prevented from competing in some of the most strenuous sports events because of a "myth" of lack of stamina and a belief, unsupported by any medical evidence, that the health of a woman's reproductive system is threatened by such sports (Hargreaves, 1994:217). As well, it has been noted that women continue to be denied access to competition in the steeplechase, pole-vault, boxing, weight-lifting, and swimming events over 800 metres at the Olympics<sup>1</sup> (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 59). According to Wong's

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<sup>1</sup>The triple jump was first included as an event for women in the 1996 Olympics. Similarly, it was not until 1984 that the marathon was included as an Olympic event for women. Men have

(1996) numbers, of the 197 countries that sent teams to the 1996 Olympics, 35 did not have a single woman. These authors contend that men have maintained a monopoly over the connection of sports to strength, aggression, and domination, and have been given the time and the ideological and economic encouragement to develop sport skills. These skills in turn, have come to be seen as “naturally” masculine. The decision to participate and the definition of participation remain outside the control of female athletes.

### *The media*

Viewed as an extension of the control of sport structure, the media have been targeted as a critical force in communicating and consolidating the delegitimation of female sports and female athleticism. Lenskyj (1987) contends it has been the media’s intent to describe and reinforce certain qualities of female athletes, especially their heterosexual appeal. She argues that contemporary media are not far removed from the publications of the late 1800s and early 1900s that detailed female athletes’ attire without reference to the games played, and that reminded readers that “lady” athletes were limited biologically and must therefore resist any susceptibility to become mannish or Amazons (Lenskyj, 1987: 212). Sport sociologists maintain that the media, by being unwilling to connect women with the images of control, strength, and power generally associated with male athletes, have inscribed popular images of femininity as a vehicle for attaching meaning to and ultimately trivializing female sport. Messner et al (1993) suggest that the verbal commentary of televised coverage of men’s and women’s basketball and tennis continually reconstructed a gender hierarchy. “Gender marking”, where women were

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competed in the both the triple jump and marathon for decades.



commonly referred to as “girls” (while men were never referred to as “boys”), linguistically granted the men dominance and infantilized the women (Messner et al, 1993). According to Hargreaves (1994) and Lenskyj (1987), the media have packaged exercise for women not as a means to fitness and strength but as a means of attaining beauty and sexually appealing body “parts”. Burton-Nelson (1994) problematizes the fact that Janet Evans swam to three gold medals in the 1988 Olympics and was described by the media as “a kitten sized tiger”; that runner Mary Decker Slaney fell in the 1988 Olympics and was labeled a “crying, distraught womanchild”; that Oksana Baiul captured the 1993 Ladies Figure Skating Championships with what was called “a combination of maturity and vulnerable fraility that makes her irresistibly attractive”; that female bodybuilders’ muscle mass is often considered to be an example of going too far and is subsequently retouched on photographs to soften the image; and that other women in sports are described in terms of their marital and family status. Burton-Nelson (1994) argues that the media have restructured the sports participation of such women as an exercise in appropriate femininity and sex appeal. What is suggested is that the media portray the image of a woman first – pretty, frail, or appealing, rather than strong. And as such, contrary to male sport which is presented as a true expression of athleticism, female athleticism has been appropriated as a site of seduction.

A subsequent cost of the media interpretations of women’s athleticism, according to critical sport sociologists, is the relative lack of coverage given to women in sport. Several scholars make the point that women have “proven” themselves as strong and aggressive athletes as they have challenged, equalled, and surpassed male athletic

standards over recent decades. Women hold the world record for a 24-hour race; the all-time low score in professional golf; the English Channel, Bering Strait, and Strait of Magellan swim records; and only a woman has swam all five Great Lakes (Hargreaves, 1994; Burton-Nelson, 1994). Yet these achievements have received little media attention. Similarly, Wong (1996) notes that Teresa Edwards became the only U.S. basketball player, male or female, to compete in four Olympics, that the real American “Dream Team” (the name used to describe the U.S. men’s Olympic basketball team) may be better suited as a title for the U.S. women’s softball team who held a win-loss record of 110 to one going into the 1996 Olympics, that Canada’s Silken Laumann “willed” herself to a bronze medal in the 1992 Olympics wearing a cast on her leg, just three months after a severe training injury, and that Algeria’s 1992 gold medalist in the 1500-metre race, Hassiba Boulmerka, trains in the streets amidst rock-throwing fundamentalists who are opposed to seeing a woman’s thighs.

For Wong, women make better stories: “Compared with men, they have to struggle harder against religious, cultural, sexual, and ethnic stereotypes” (Wong, 1996: C7). Sport stories, however, are seen overwhelmingly as stories about men and as such, media expressions of sport become a site of signification: from what is said to what is not said, the male athlete is created and elevated as superior to the female athlete. What some writers believe is that by virtually ignoring the struggles and achievements of female athletes, the media provide a powerful message that depicts women as less athletic. As Burton-Nelson notes, about 92 per cent of televised sports coverage in the U.S. is of men, while women’s sport constitutes about five per cent (Burton-Nelson,

1994: 195). Similarly, Bryson (1987) illustrates that Australian findings parallel the U.S. media coverage – two per cent of sport reporting in major city newspapers was devoted to women’s sport, while men’s comprised 13 times that (Bryson, 1987: 353). These writers also point to the limited television coverage for Olympic events like synchronized swimming or Australia’s netball (a sport exclusive to participation by women and which has the third highest membership of all Australian sports, including men’s sport) as well as the fact that the printed photographs devoted to women’s sport are far fewer and smaller and that there are significantly less action photographs of female athletes. Another example of this skewed depiction is American Women’s Drag Racing which had its commentary not in the sports section but in the style section of a national newspaper (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 201). These authors understand the experiences of female athletes as mediated; essentially shrunk, marginalized, and discredited as neither influential nor shared by other women nor certainly by men. This is how overlooking them can be justified. And for those women who are noticed, the writers believe that they are often “firsts” – the first female to play high school football or to sign a contract to play in the National Hockey League; they are construed as exceptions and therefore unrepresentative of female athletes.

### ***Voices of authority***

Analyses of female athleticism have viewed the evolution and evaluation of women’s sport as guided (both presently and in the past) by men. Several writers hold that through excluding women and distorting their participation men have defined the

sport environment for almost all women. Bryson tries to demonstrate this influence of men over women's athleticism with two examples: the Australian premier who stepped in to ban a kickboxing competition in order to preserve the "good manners" of the women (Bryson, 1987: 353); and the female cliff diver who was forced to withdraw after she qualified for the finals of a competition because the men refused to compete. One official justified the decision: "This is a death-defying activity – the men are taking a great gamble to prove their courage. What would be the point if everyone saw that a woman could do the same?" (Bryson, 1983: 422). The Regina *Leader Post* reported the comments of a Saint John, N.B. city councillor who refused to endorse a request for funding to help send a women's rugby team to the national championships: "We should not be supporting the downfall of the lady-like attributes of our girls" (Leader Post, 1996: A1). Such masculine ascendancy is also illustrated by both Lenskyj (1992) and Hargreaves (1994) who point to programs once controlled by women being subsumed by male counterparts: the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union's (CIAU) 1978 amalgamation of female and male programs (Lenskyj, 1998: 24), and the disbanding of the U.S. Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (AIAW) in favour of combining male and female programs in a male-dominated National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1984 (Hargreaves, 1994: 180). In both cases, the authors argue the result has been the maintenance of male status and decision-making power at the cost of female representatives and female input.

In a recent study of Canadian national sport organizations, Hargreaves found that approximately one half of the entry-level positions are held by women, while only 28 per

cent of the executive directors and 23 per cent of technical directors are women (Hargreaves, 1994: 200). On an international level, she notes that there were no women members of the IOC between 1884 and 1981, and only seven women held the position of president within 167 national Olympic Committees (Hargreaves, 1994: 221). White and Brackenridge (1985) show that in terms of coaches, the trend across North America is to an overall increase in the number of coaches for female athletes but with the number of women holding head coaching positions declining (White and Brackenridge, 1985: 2). Burton-Nelson looks at the United States, claiming that among women's sport teams, more than half of all high school and college coaches are men (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 162). With specific reference to Canada, Lenskyj draws on CIAU statistics for 1987 to show that women held only 50 per cent of full time and 34 per cent part time head coach positions in women's university athletics (Lenskyj, 1992b: 26-27). These authors conclude that the pervasiveness of men throughout the sport hierarchy has translated into men's teams being given priority for sponsorship, training times, access to equipment and fields, and recruitment of coaches and, ultimately, the foundations of sporting success. As well, it is held that with few incentives for change and few vehicles of resistance, female athletes are undeniably dependent upon men for access to sport, the way its defined, its organization and administration, and its various role models and adjudicators.

### **Women as Sporting Bodies**

The studies just cited have examined exclusionary tactics practised against women's sport and have attempted to demonstrate that the female athlete has come to

represent a malleable unfinished project, shaped in reference to a social identity of either masculinity and domination or femininity and subordination. Some scholars view the physical body of the athlete as the most conspicuous symbol of this manipulation. By identifying sport as an object of discourse, created and recreated by practices that inscribe a certain athleticism, writers have subsequently located the body as contested terrain upon which social as well as self-identities are constructed.

### ***Disembodiment***

Problematizing women in sport has led to the conviction that the female sporting body is not viewed as authentic. If a woman adopts a “feminine” posture of grace and passivity, it is accepted not because it is her expression but because it has been defined as appropriate; if, on the other hand she embodies the sport ideals of power and domination, it is denied as her experience because such expressions have been appropriated by men. Female athletes are then held to be alienated as they are refused the power to define. Hart (1980) maintains that with such a lack of alternatives to prescribed femininity in sport, female athletes have been faced with a tension between femininity and athleticism such that the pursuit of athletics necessarily comes at the expense of femininity (Hart, 1980: 206-207). Examples of female athletes not cutting their hair, refusing to pose as bodybuilders for magazine ads, and hoping to please the media by commenting on their love of children, are explained as measures taken by female athletes to preserve their femininity (Hart, 1980; Blue, 1987; Burton-Nelson, 1994). Writers have argued that women athletes are very aware of the threat and often the reality of being identified as

unfeminine or lesbian because of their sport participation (Young, 1997; Burton-Nelson, 1994)<sup>2</sup>. Burton-Nelson (1994) suggests that sport intensifies gender-identity problems as those women who become more competent in “masculine” athletics characterized by violence, physical strength, and aggression seemingly *further* discredit their femininity – the implication is that to achieve athletic excellence is to be male, not female<sup>3</sup>.

According to Blue (1987), this suspicion that there is something unnatural or manly about a woman doing well in sport is reinforced by the Olympic tests that force women athletes (never male athletes) to undergo a medical examination to determine their sex (Blue, 1987: 145-148). Burton-Nelson (1994) draws attention to the fact that pro-volleyball player Gabrielle Reece posed for People wearing only a bikini bottom and clutching a hot pink volleyball to her chest and that Steffi Graf posed for Vogue in swimsuits and a low-cut dress. She claims that in seeking money and endorsements that will allow them to keep participating in sports, many women appear to collude with accepted sexual portraits because they understand that their heterosexual appeal sells faster than world-class achievement<sup>4</sup> (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 215-216). Female athletes are held to be alienated from the capacities of their bodies in favour of supporting a socially imposed femininity. Lenskyj, in looking at coaches who “imposed femininity” upon their athletes, documents the story of a women’s university volleyball team in British Columbia whose

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<sup>2</sup> In 1994, Ila Borders, a pitcher for Southern California College won her first two games quite convincingly, allowing only one earned run. One New York interviewer asked her “Are you a lesbian?” (Kane, 1995: 211).

<sup>3</sup> In 1991, Natasha, a nine-year old soccer goalie was so outstanding that an opponent’s father demanded a “panty check”. According to one report, Natasha got a perm to look more like a girl. (Kane, 1995: 211).

<sup>4</sup> A *Sports Illustrated* cover of Monica Seles’ return to tennis displayed no racket or athleticism but rather cleavage. Similarly, Katerina Witt posed naked for *Playboy*’s November 1998 issue.

male coach required the players to grow their hair long and wear it in a ponytail with ribbons (Lenskyj, 1994: 359). The intent, apparently, was to present the women as more “feminine” and less “athletic”. According to Hargreaves (1994), those sports which emphasize balance, flexibility, and grace (ie. gymnastics, figure skating, and synchronized swimming) are characterized as “feminine appropriate” because they transform women athletes into objects of desire for men through sensuous and provocative movements. For Burton-Nelson, “nowhere but in sport are women so systematically thrust into feminine, sexualized roles” (Burton-Nelson, 1994: 215).

In terms of pain, injury, and eating disorders, it is argued that the coach often frames sport as a personal choice and threats to health as a personal problem for the female athlete, in effect, deflecting any claims to responsibility. Ryan (1995) claims that a Russian gymnast became a paraplegic because her coach demanded complete subservience and forced her to compete when she was plagued with injuries, that U.S. female gymnasts have been forced to compete with cracked vertebrae, broken bones, and with their tendons attached with screws because of the insistence of male coaches, and that the extreme diet restrictions imposed by U.S. women’s gymnastics coach Bela Karolyi, coupled with his incessant comments about the athletes’ appearances, have produced eating disorders in a shocking number of his gymnasts. Ryan (1995) is trying to show that the body becomes a machine dedicated to the sport ethic of risk. For Duquin (1994), the mind becomes dissociated from the body such that the feelings of the body are ignored in order for the athlete to continue to perform (1994: 270).

However, the point is not simply that female athletic bodies are explicitly forced



and entirely dependent upon the intentions of a coach. Rather, studies note that bodies are managed by technologies of self-surveillance in which the athlete internalizes and instigates work on her body according to the desired feminine shape. According to Young and White (1994), elaborate vocabularies and techniques are employed by female athletes to control their bodies through pain and injury. As such, female athletes deny pain and its effects on the body, disrespect pain and hold it as irrelevant, depersonalize pain so that it becomes a “bodily betrayal” or is merely localized to a part of the body, and equate playing with pain as an act of courage and a part of membership. Several writers have argued that such disembodiment is often linked to eating disorders, an almost exclusively female problem (Ryan, 1995; Taub and Benson, 1992; Overdorf, 1987). In examining women’s gymnastics and figure skating, Ryan (1995) contends that staving off puberty to maintain the ideal slender feminine body is the key to success in such sports – from starvation, diuretics and purging to excessive training, the female body is stalled from maturing. Ryan (1995) notes that with no estrogen being produced, bone density is lost and athletes become more susceptible to stress fractures, premature osteoporosis, and curvature of the spine. Her argument is that they are pushed to their physical limits and that their bodies are distorted and potentially destroyed. The case of Christy Heinrich is used to support this position. She was part of the U.S. gymnastics team and when she was told she would never make the Olympic squad if she did not lose weight, she developed anorexia nervosa and within a few years died of multiple organ failure. She weighed less than 50 pounds. These writers are saying that even outside such elite and “feminine” sports as gymnastics and figure skating, the same slender body

image is enforced. For the female athlete, one of the most significant indicators of success is now considered to be her body type – an unforgiving aesthetic standard.

### *Sexual offenses*

The possibility of sexual harassment and abuse of female athletes lies in the gender hierarchy of the sporting world and the positional power of (predominantly) male coaches. In her chapter, “My Coach Says He Loves Me”, Burton-Nelson (1994) tells how sexual harassment and sexual assault were often reinterpreted by the women as messages of acceptance – they felt that the coaches’ attention was confirmation from a patriarchal world that they could be part of it. With coaches excusing their sexual advances and harassment with promises of love and the fulfillment of athletic dreams, the women replaced their goals with the goals of the coach. In women’s pro-tennis, Burton-Nelson (1994) discovered that suggestive remarks, fondling of the athletes, unwelcome massages, and sexual relations with male coaches came to be seen as perfectly “normal” despite their destructive influence on the athletes. Her research also uncovered examples of a male basketball coach who demanded sexual favours from his female players in exchange for playing time, and of a male coach who tried to seduce lesbian players to “straighten them out”. Rayment et al (1995) documented the case of a British swimming coach who was allowed to continue coaching women after being disciplined for telling a woman to strip for a naked “fitness test” while he undressed. He was given a 17-year jail sentence years later for the sexual assault of 11 of his female athletes (Rayment et al, 1995: 14). Mackay (1996) details the story of figure skating coach Karel Fajfr who was

charged with forcing his athletes to have sex with him and who commented that all the skaters were “easy meat” (Mackay, 1996: 68). In arguing that sport is an arena ripe for sexual exploitation, Mackay quotes one woman’s experience: “I desperately wanted his approval – more even than I wanted my own father’s – and I thought if I were to sleep with him, he would give it to me” (Mackay, 1996: 70). According to Burton-Nelson (1994), on one level the coach seduces the female athlete and thus effectively traps her in a sexualized and dependent position from which he reasserts his dominance. On another level, his sexual harassment reinforces his own heterosexual masculinity. For Burton-Nelson, control becomes central to his gender identity (1994: 162-166). Families, organizations, teams, and even the players entrust a coach with the responsibility to do what is “right” and when abuse occurs, he is often left unquestioned.

Kolnes’ (1993) examination of the general research literature on sexual harassment details a profile of offenders that characterizes many male coaches. Beyond being male, 10 to 20 years older than the victim, knowing the victim, being trusted by the victim, and having a parental role, the typical male offender, including the coach, also takes great pains to isolate the victim from others. As well, Kolnes’ indicators of the likelihood of severe sexual harassment (lack of sensitivity and empathy, and high authoritarianism) have been found to be fundamental descriptors of the male coach (Molstad, 1987; Whitaker and Molstad, 1986). Theoretically, this illustration of general sexual offenders demonstrates that the sexual harassment of female athletes by male coaches might not be unexpected.

In terms of a more systematic look at the sports world, studies by Holman (1995) and Kirby and Greaves (in Smith, 1996) examine sexual harassment among male and female athletes in Canada. Holman's survey of 580 female and 444 male university athletes found that incidences of sexual harassment were generally not gender specific. However, more threatening forms of behavior such as coercion and physical intrusion/assault were reported more often by women. In terms of game dynamics, female "starters" (as opposed to substitutes) were the only group that experienced physical aggression at the hands of a coach. Subsequently, women athletes were consistently in stronger agreement than men that the statements outlining a coach's behaviour (including comments and physical intrusions) represented sexual harassment. According to Holman, the respondents believed that "males are threatened by the presence of females in athletics" and that sexual harassment is used by male coaches and athletes to deter women from pursuing an athletic career (Holman, 1995:4). Similarly, the work of Kirby and Greaves (in Smith, 1996) has found that both male and female Canadian elite athletes are victimized, but it is more often women in sport who are abused, usually by men. And while the study reports that many of the 266 respondents had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment and believed abuse to be an important issue in sport, the athletes also normalized the existence of violence as just a part of sport.

In addition, Lackey (1990) and Yorganci (1989) have both compiled survey results of female athletes' experiences with male coaches. Lackey analyzes the responses of 264 female athletes from nine colleges and three universities in Nebraska who were training under male coaches. The findings indicate that approximately 25 per cent of the

respondents identified harassment as occurring in each of three categories: profanity, intrusive physical contacts, and demeaning language. In terms of more serious harassment, less than two per cent of the women had ever experienced or known of verbal intrusions, fondling, or nonconsensual intercourse. Overall, the respondents seemingly felt the behaviors they experienced and witnessed at the hands of male coaches represented no real threat – only two per cent believed sexual harassment was a problem (Lackey, 1990: 25). Lackey notes that the three forms of sexual harassment most often cited were generally accepted by the athletes as part of the game.

In paralleling Lackey's study, Yorganci's (1989) investigation of female athletes in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and England has found that 54 per cent of the 149 respondents experienced or knew someone who had experienced demeaning language, verbal intrusion, physical contact, fondling, or pressure to have sexual intercourse from their male coaches (all definitive examples of sexual harassment). As with Lackey who discovered women often accepted sexual harassment as a part of sport, Yorganci found that of the 54 per cent who experienced or knew of others who had experienced harassing behavior, 57 per cent thought it was sexual harassment, while 43 per cent did not perceive the same behavior as sexual harassment (Yorganci, 1989: 199). Ultimately, the studies raise two important issues: on the one hand, the existence of sexual harassment has been established although not to a wide degree; and as well, the acceptance of some forms of sexual harassment (or the failure to define certain behaviours as sexual harassment) raises the question of whether women are being coopted under the messages of hegemonic masculinity such that the behaviour is left unproblematicized.

Tied to this investigation of offenses of male coaches is the research compiled on the male athlete. According to Lenskyj (1992a), many coaches and instructors in physical education and university sport are drawn from the ranks of former athletes, and as such, there is a fundamental link between the behaviours and motives of athletes and ultimately those of coaches. Current writers argue that the male athlete lives in an exalted milieu where he is glorified and worshipped, and learns to expect and ultimately demand differential treatment in a society that is committed to ensuring his power and privilege (Curry, 1991; Melnick, 1992; Kane and Disch, 1993; Burton-Nelson; 1994). Researchers have found that male athletes (along with fraternity members) comprise the campus group most likely to commit sexual assault: one study found male athletes were involved in approximately one-third of 862 attacks on college campuses; while another study reported that 55 per cent of all admitted acquaintance rapes were committed by male athletes (who accounted for only 16 per cent of the student body) (Burton-Nelson, 1994; Melnick, 1992). Burton-Nelson goes on to say that the media and community often deny or merely reinterpret accusations of sexual assault as “boys will be boys” and act as if no crime was committed. In the words of McKay (1993) there is a “fraternal social contract” among sportswriters, athletic departments and coaches, and sports fans who insist on the purity of the athletes. Burton-Nelson uses as examples the lawyer for three college athletes charged with rape who contended that no harm was done as the victim’s hair was not messed up and there were no bruises; the university review board that allowed a football player, found guilty of sexual misconduct because he forced a woman to have intercourse, to retain his scholarship and stay in school as no school rules

had been violated by his actions; as well as the two university coaches who were disciplined for lying about fund raising efforts to help a player charged with sexual assault. Her point is that the athletic environment is a breeding ground for sexual harassment and assault (Burton-Nelson; 1994). Lenskyj's (1992a) point that coaches are often retired athletes bears repeating here.

### ***Personal Empowerment***

Despite a potential to constrain and distort opportunities for female athletes, sport also seems to have the capacity to enable. Indeed, research has shown that sport carries enormous emancipatory potential for female athletes, especially in the development of a positive and stable self-identity and resistance to notions of passive femininity (Miller and Penz, 1991; Blinde et al, 1993; Blinde et al, 1994; Young and White, 1994). Beyond the gains of friendship, a spirit of cooperation, and a feeling of competence that extends to the outside world, these writers hold that female athletes experience a harmony of self-actualization in sport – the realization of personal potential and the exercise of control. For Young and White, this control is rooted in the female athlete's proactive approach to constructing and redefining gender norms and expectations (Young and White, 1994: 4). The assertion is that with women making claims to aggression, competition, physical strength, and dominance, they are able to contest the notions of women's "natural" feminine capacities – women are held to be active agents in the dismantling of masculine hegemony.

Miller and Penz demonstrate how female body builders destabilize "the

entrenched meanings that formerly secured [bodybuilding] as ‘self-evidently’ or ‘naturally’ masculine” (Miller and Penz, 1991: 149). The study maintains that by challenging the traditionally masculine prerequisites of the sport (especially men’s fixation on body mass and strength), and by prioritizing alternative concerns such as nutrition, modesty, and patience, female bodybuilding is reframed by the athletes as women’s work. Similarly, Theberge (1987) has argued that some women’s softball leagues have sought, not to change the rules or structures of the game, but to redefine power as support outside the traditional hierarchical emphasis on winning and sacrifice. As such, these transformations in women’s bodybuilding and softball have come to be seen as having given women an autonomous place in sport and new concepts for appropriate behavior.

### **Coaching and Gender**

One of the most direct and influential contacts that mediates a woman’s experience of the sport world is the coach. As such, it is the coach-athlete relationship that is seen to form a fundamental locus through which control of the female sporting body is played out. Working from the position that the coach determines the condition of the athlete’s participation, White argues that “coaches have power of knowledge, power to enforce training regimes, power over athletes’ private lives, ... and in some cases, power of decision as to whether the athlete steps on the court or stays on the bench” (in Hargreaves, 1994: 202). At the competitive level, it is held that the coach’s responsibilities are tied almost exclusively to the development of an athlete’s skills and



the performance of these skills. What writers have come to problematize is that while the coaches are accountable for the results of their efforts, the coaches' efforts themselves are left virtually unchecked – the concern is focused more on the proper management of athleticism than on the athlete. The implication is not that every coach-athlete relationship is based on manipulation that goes beyond the nurturing of an athlete's potential. Rather, sport sociologists have suggested that there are several significant factors that could mediate the character of the control enacted by a coach. One of these factors is apparently the gender of the coach.

Several authors have found that consistently, across sports, across countries, and across skill levels, women continue to occupy a disproportionately low number of coaching positions (Pratt and Eitzen, 1989; Knoppers, 1987; Theberge, 1990; Lenskyj, 1992). They contend that this bias is shown by the limited number of role models for female athletes, a male sport hierarchy resistant to women striving for positions of authority such as coaching, the normalization of male coaches coupled with the appointment of women as token coaches who typify all women if they fail and who are deemed exceptions if they are successful, and the subsequent justification of female coaches' limited access to resources and decision-making processes. However, with such restrictions placed on women's voices in coaching, the point is not to say that female coaches can be analyzed simply as an extension of what characterizes a male coach. Rather in claiming the female coach is cast as subordinate and other, the writers are contending that the potential exists for women to experience coaching and interactions with athletes very differently from men.

Research shows that female coaches are not exempt from colluding with masculine constructions of sport that prescribe a certain subordinate femininity nor from creating an environment that is conducive to the abuses of female athletes. While it may be that the disembodiment of the athlete more often stems from male coaches who discourage acknowledgments of fear and pain in favour of the rationalization of injury, bodily sacrifice, and silent athletes (Kolnes, 1992; Duquin, 1994), it has been found that female coaches like male coaches accept and propagate a fundamental tenet of sport – that success is measured by outcomes. Theberge (1990) believes the congruency between male and female coaches' beliefs illustrates the strength of masculine ideology and its ethic of achievement. Similarly, Blinde (1989) holds that female coaches have exploited athletes academically by controlling athletes' class enrollment and by being insensitive to the demands of school work, emotionally by manipulating and excluding athletes as a means of control, and physically by employing training philosophies which downplayed injuries and disregarded the health of the athletes. In contrast, Kolnes (1992) argues that resistance, although limited, is evidenced in the often participatory style of female coaches that stands in opposition to the consistently authoritarian and intimidatory methods employed by male coaches. Nixon's research (1994) shows a similar pattern; she found that female coaches at a NCAA Division 1 university were substantially less likely than male coaches to agree that athletes who endure pain and play hurt deserve respect, that members playing hurt impressed them as coaches, and that coaches make athletes feel guilty for not playing hurt or with pain. Theberge (1990) also found that female coaches rejected the dominant (and ultimately male) view of coaching as a

position of control and rather equated any power they had as providing support and encouragement. Theberge went on to say that several of the coaches were “frightened” by the responsibility they held not in terms of producing results but in terms of their influence over the lives of female athletes. A sense of obligation often influenced the work of the female coaches – an obligation to do good in terms of fostering the athlete’s own sense of independence. In effect, such research has pointed out that the woman coach can present a challenge to sport’s ethic of extreme sacrifice and to the traditionally justified claims of coaches’ unlimited power over athletes. However, Willis (1982) contends that although female coaches may provide a means to ensuring that the control of the female sporting body stays with the athletes, they have had to “take up the challenge totally within the terms of the preferred ideological definition” (Willis, 1982: 130). In this sense, most female athletes have no alternative to the traditional masculine models of sport and in the end, are likely to face a male coach supported by a masculine-friendly ideology.

Some researchers suggest that one measure of power that a male coach has over a female coach is the power conferred on him simply by virtue of his gender. As cited earlier, Lenskyj (1992a) writes that the script of reverence and glorification bestowed upon male *athletes* is undoubtedly extended to male *coaches* (many of whom are drawn from the ranks of former male athletes and whose presence is legitimated in the sport world) (Lenskyj, 1992a: 23). So despite studies like Kolnes’ (1992) preliminary research which describes the male coach unfavourably as a “personal patriarch” who dominates communication, instills fear, and demands full submission to his control (1992: 5-6),

other authors have maintained that a male coach is often preferred by women because he is perceived as a legitimate source of expert knowledge and power (Molstad and Whitaker, 1987; Whitaker and Molstad, 1986). These writers articulate a dilemma for the female athlete: she faces a male coach steeped in excessive authority but is convinced the authority is legitimate.

The literature reviewed in this chapter paints a picture of a sporting world that is masculine, in which women participate on terms dictated by men. The fact that access to this sporting world is mediated for women mainly by coaches who are men is further problematized. Women's sporting bodies, as noted earlier, are "contested terrain", and women engage in this contest from a position of structural disadvantage. What is missing from the discussion thus far, however, is the way women themselves view this contest, and the extent to which they can influence outcomes to meet their own needs. Framing women as agents, however powerful the structural forces which constrain their agency, is the approach that shapes the present study. The theoretical foundations which support this view are articulated in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Three: Theoretical Perspectives**

In setting up the theoretical perspectives which frame my research, I take as my starting point recent developments in theorizing about gender that build upon both the political projects and theoretical approaches of what has been called “second-wave” feminism. These approaches include the attention to individualized rights, equality of access, and gender neutrality which characterized liberal feminism; the recognition of structural constraints and the relationship (however unclear) between patriarchy and capitalism characteristic of socialist feminism; and the essentialist debates about difference and the primacy of patriarchy as the ultimate and inevitable source of women’s oppression associated with radical feminism. The current work I want to incorporate involves writers who move the questions about gender relations from its roots in “grand theorizing” about men and women (each as a global category), to an analysis which is more nuanced and attentive to dimensions of individual identity other than sex category which influence the understanding of gender.

#### **Feminism and Gender Relations**

Whatever the theoretical debates over the nature and origins of “women’s oppression”, what was consistent in all early feminist theorizing was the desire to make women’s lives visible, marked as an issue. It was the acknowledgment of differences between men and women and the identification that such differences formed the basis of men’s domination and power that was the basis of the feminist agenda. “Knowing that

difference produced domination enabled women to name, analyze, and set about changing their victimization” (Baca Zinn et al, 1997: 2). However, feminist thought continues to evolve beyond simply acknowledging difference.

Contemporary perspectives offer an alternative to the contentions of earlier writers and activists in presenting the possibility that gender relations are more than an issue of male versus female, or (all) men opposing (all) women. Theoretical positions that present men and women with a priori, dichotomous and biologically fixed essences have come to be criticized, in Connell’s (1987) terms, as “categorical”. Some theorists have obscured this biological framework and the dependence on “natural” differences to inform their positions by using an additive approach, one in which a “cultural elaboration of difference” was simply added on to male/female distinctions (Connell, 1987:73).

Connell pays particular attention to sex role theory which, while claiming to be a departure from theories based on biological distinctions, inevitably dissolves into this additive approach. On the surface, sex role theory connects gender differences with social structure by maintaining that male and female roles are played out in response to social expectations (Connell, 1987: 47). However, Connell points out that this very emphasis on the social becomes a kind of determinism as individuals are “trapped” in stereotyped interpersonal expectations. The “female role” and “male role” are “tacitly treated as equal”. And the tacit biological basis of the roles “seems to have persuaded many theorists that there is not power relationship here at all” (1987: 50-51).

All such theorizing did little to denaturalize gender relations and actually reified the notion of a “feminine destiny”. The immutability of natural distinctions between the

sexual anatomy of men and women translated into the creation of immutable (and mutually exclusive) masculine and feminine roles and body images believed to be rooted in human nature. This reductionism has bred social consequences – it has shaped the way family, work, education, and politics are constituted (Mackie, 1990: 48). It is the determinism of these “natural” gender divisions that many contemporary feminists problematize. The division of human experience into two apparently natural and complementary categories obscures the fact that men have traditionally had the power to define; masculine becomes superior. Further, men are then seen as the norm and their qualities are valued; women become the “other”, deviations from the masculine; and the social order becomes an accommodation to the “natural” order.

However, as Lorber argues, physiological differences between men and women “are socially meaningless until social practices transform them into social facts” (Lorber, 1994: 18). The gender system has been defined as a “culturally specific arrogation of the human body” (Cole, 1994: 9) in which anatomy and the meanings attached to difference are used to define and coerce gender identities of male domination and female subordination. Feminists contend that our reality is mediated and as such, the body is not simply the immediacy of a physical form, nor is an identity the natural expression of a role determined by the body’s sex. Bodies are said to be created, inscribed by practices of presenting “gender”; as such, gender becomes a social construction, rooted in hierarchy and inequality, not biology. Indeed, “[a] *social* theory is pointless, or at best peripheral, if it is true that the basic determinants are biological” (Connell, 1987: 63).

In questioning the reification of gender relations as natural patterns, feminists have exposed gender not as a thing people possess but as a site of interplay between the personal and the social practices of power and sexuality. Politicizing gender, therefore, has come to mean situating experiences in their historical and cultural contexts. For West and Zimmerman (1987), gender should be viewed as an accomplishment, something that individuals “do”. But while it is individuals who are “doing gender”, the process is interactional and institutional in character:

If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called to account for our gender enactments. (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 146).

A perspective which “denaturalizes” gender allows for (as it has been in part produced by) the critically important acknowledgement of differences *among* women (and among men) that has further shaped feminist theorizing. According to bell hooks (1995), recognizing these differences is crucial:

If people of color naïvely allow our understanding of feminist politics to be shaped by mass media which focus only on white power-feminism then we become complicit, denying ourselves and our diverse communities access to a resistance struggle that would provide strategies for challenging sexist exploitation and oppression in our lives .... [A]n anti-racist agenda must be at the core of our movement if there is ever to be solidarity between women and effective coalitions that cross racial boundaries and unite us in a common struggle. (hooks, 1995: 100-101).

So all interactions must also be seen as playing out in relations that are local and nuanced, culturally and historically specific. Because no one can speak for all women, all feminist standpoints must necessarily be partial. As Kemp and Squires (1997) note,



“feminisms” may be a better term to use at a time when “the current trend is most definitely to denounce totalizing theories, to celebrate difference” and to “recognize ‘otherness’” (Kemp and Squires, 1997: 4). Contemporary feminism engages with post-modernism, taking into account the intersection of class, race, religion, sexuality, and gender in the formation of all identities. Indeed, “nobody experiences themselves as solely gendered” (Baca Zinn et al, 1998: 6).

What this perspective opens up is the acknowledgement that individuals are active players in the construction of their own identities. They are agents too in the way they “do gender”, supporting, accommodating, colluding, and resisting. But *what* they are supporting, accommodating, or resisting continues to be critical. West and Zimmerman (1987) remind us that gender is played out in the context of structural constraints and the need for accountability. Agents are not free agents.

Ortner points out the need for “a way to put human intention and desire back into the picture” (1996: 11), while not losing sight of structural constraints. Theoretically, one resolution of the structure-agency dilemma in the arena of gender relations has been articulated by Connell (1987) in terms of a theory of practice. This approach, according to Connell, would recognize power as well as choice, doubt, and transformation. In this way, “categoricalism can be resolved by ... focusing on what people do by way of constituting the social relations they live in ... [while] voluntarism can be overcome by an attention to the structure of social relations as a condition of all practices” (Connell, 1987: 62).

## **Sport and Feminist Thought**

Traditionally, sport has occupied an almost sacred position, an innocent state of “play” free from the demands of the economy and politics. As Hargreaves (1994) notes, theorizing about sport was essentially uncritical until the late 1970s, and had a functionalist orientation that assumed sports were a feature of a common cultural heritage, contributing to the health and character development of individuals. The relevance of sporting bodies and physicality, control and empowerment were largely overlooked; sport hardly seemed to be a central component of what made “girls” into “women”. A socialist perspective in sport theorizing has resulted largely in metanarratives which detail capitalism’s disciplining and appropriation of “play” in order to transform sport into both a profitable commodity as well as a training ground for “corporeal discipline” and the development of compliant labour (Rowe, 1998: 243). Ironically, where some feminists have more critically assessed the sporting world, the effect was more to reinvigorate and legitimate athletics as a masculine preserve than to dismantle any disparities or misrepresentations of women in sport. Such has been the case with the application of sex-role theory which concentrates on explaining the conflict between femininity and athleticism. This research (which continues today) started with the assumption that women in sport constituted a form of deviance, understood as imperfect socialization, in which women were not persuaded to avoid athletic ideals. In an example of this, Lorber (1997) refers to a 1987 study of female basketball players who “did athlete” on the court with intense aggressive behaviour and then “did woman” after the game with make-up and hair practices. Lorber construes this as women managing a

status dilemma between their athleticism and femininity (1997:16). Beyond this, the preoccupation has been with “proving” women’s sport participation produces no loss of femininity, despite the assumption that women must necessarily face a tension between their “role” as athlete, and their “role” as female. Hall argues that sport has been defined by masculine standards and therefore the conflict between athleticism and gender comes to exist only in the realm of the feminine (Hall, 1996: 19); by problematizing women in sport, sex-role theory has effectively left the male as privileged and unproblematic in the world of sport.

Following the compensatory and individual rights logic of liberal feminism, other sport activists have aimed at increasing the attention and investments of the state and sport organizations given to women in order to match that received by male athletics. The contention is that the impact and visibility of women in sport and the development of female athleticism can be remedied by simply increasing their presence, and ultimately their voice. And undoubtedly, there have been marked successes: legislation in Canada has been implemented, encouraging equal sporting opportunities for women and men in public and educational settings and facilitating a boom in women’s participation and contact. Conferences and programs have been established in Canada since the early 1970s which have shown a commitment to women in sport (Hall, 1997: 92-101).

However, according to more radical positions, numbers and resources have done little to problematize the existing structures and ideologies of the sporting world. Women are seen to be incorporated into the masculine system. And according to this reasoning, the practical choice would be to dismiss this integration approach in favour of what

appears to be the only other option available – segregation. And as with criticism against general radical pursuits, the point is made that arguing for the separation of woman from men in sport has overtones of essentialism; the sense is created that women have an exclusive “feminine athleticism” that incorporates such qualities as an “ethic of care” as well as an aversion to winning and adversarialism (Kane, 1995:194-196). So in seeing sport as a masculinizing project that is intended to forge male solidarity, radical theorists and activists are caught in the same debate between equality and difference that looms more broadly in the feminist agenda. On the one hand, “when women actively participate in the symbols, practices, and institutions of sport” in order to legitimize their presence, “what they do there is often not considered ‘real’ sport, nor in some cases are they viewed as real women.” (Hall, 1996: 100-101). Or when they maintain control over their own alternative sport experience, this is seen to undercut the integrity of the sport and perpetuate the notion that women cannot compete with men, that they are innately inferior athletically, and that they need to be isolated and protected. A solution as to how female athleticism should unfold is far from resolved.

Where feminist theorizing has most profoundly engaged the sporting world has been in the de-naturalization of gender in athletics which corresponds to the shift in feminist approaches more broadly. The connection between the physiological and social has been fundamental to feminist projects in reconceptualizing sport and sporting bodies as seemingly natural consequences of the male/female sex dichotomy, and subsequently, in exposing the sport world as a social construction -- a medium and product of evolving gender relations. In the Olympics, women with chromosomal ambiguity (i.e. with XY

chromosomes that produce no male anatomy or physiology) are forced to undergo a battery of tests and physical exams: men are not tested (Lorber, 1994: 14). What feminists understand from such practices is that no female athletes should be allowed to compete with any masculine advantage – they must prove their femininity and ultimately their athletic difference. As an embodied act, sport is seen to encourage the exaggeration and approval of divisions based upon slight physiological distinctions, masking the relationship between biology and culture. In order to call into question the naturalness of cultural prescriptions of “appropriate” masculine and feminine athleticism, feminist analyses note that sport has embraced an ideology that defends and normalizes an idealized form of the masculine character and an illegitimate form of the female athlete as the “other” – an ideology conceptualized as hegemonic masculinity. As such, differences between athletes have been accepted uncritically as natural differences between “better” men and “inferior” women. As Willis argues:

Sport and biological beliefs about gender differences combine into one of the few privileged areas where we seem to be dealing with unmediated “reality”, where we know “what’s what” without having to listen to the involved, self-serving analyses of theorists, analysts, political groups, etc. Running faster, jumping higher, throwing further [sic] can be *seen* – not interpreted. (1982:117).

Indeed, the connection between biology and gender in sport is a powerful tool for hegemonic masculinity as the measurable immediacy of the body seems to leave male superiority impervious to challenge. For feminists, then, the issue is not a comparison of male and female athletes but rather how and why masculine definitions and experiences of sport are necessarily seen as worthy of emulation; an issue of how gender difference in

sport has been promoted and how female athleticism has been systematically contrived. The historical resistance to female entrance to and appropriation of sport, the sport structures that disproportionately give priority to male sport, and the distorted media interpretations of female athletes have all contributed to the expression of hegemonic masculinity in sport and its reception into public consciousness. The feminist claim is that superior athleticism is defined in ways that privilege the skills and social attributes traditionally associated with men; the ensuing comparisons systematically show women as inferior (Kane, 1995: 197). Any cultural message about sport becomes a dual one: that which is male is valued; that which is female is devalued. As men are encouraged to enter sport and adopt this masculine identity, their athletic socialization promotes thinking in hierarchical terms which highlights the differences, not the similarities between the sexes. Athletic accomplishment is established by rank and separation. As a result, female athletes are conspicuously limited in constituting and defining the sport world because of the apparent “facts” about their inferiority.

In rendering women inferior and marginalized, hegemonic masculinity has upheld heterosexual relations as normative; the identity of a female athlete is conflated with the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality (Hall, 1990: 235). Indeed, hegemonic masculinity demands not only a female athlete who is “appropriately” feminine but also a heterosexual female athlete controllable by men. Inevitably, women in sport have become inextricably linked to the commercialization of the female body and sexuality. In terms of women’s participation, those sports which emphasize balance, coordination, flexibility, and grace (such as gymnastics, figure skating, and synchronized swimming)

have been characterized as “feminine appropriate” because they affirm a popular image of sporting masculinity. Skills and performance are shadowed in favour of transforming female athletes into objects of desire for men. Otherwise, the construction of woman as an unnatural athlete, becomes the construction of the female athlete as an unnatural woman (i.e. lesbian). Ultimately, theorists argue that femininity fulfills its role by defining the female body as a physical liability in terms of masculine standards and as a sexual asset in terms of masculine desires.

What needs to be taken into account here, however, is the “categorical” nature of such theorizing. Hegemonic masculinity is an ideology with the weight of a structural constraint, not a determining force. What is missing is attention to the role of women as agents in the male-dominated sporting world in which they engage. Connell’s (1987) “theory of practice” perspective invites a theoretical approach which would acknowledge the power relations constraining women in the sporting world, while also acknowledging the ways individual women (and in this case their individual male coaches) “do gender” in a variety of individual, local situations.

This is how I see the sport world, one in which structure and agency are reflexive; this is how my research has been informed. It is therefore not surprising that I expect to find women as athletes vying for control of their bodies. Sometimes they will lose out when hegemonic masculinity holds strong and the coach-athlete relationship is played out as aggressive male and submissive female; other times, they will prevail, they will determine their own sporting experience, defy what has been traditionally expected of them, and fight for their right to define their own athleticism. These women have entered

a world that has privileged men and disparaged women; that does not mean that women's experiences in that world are predetermined. The point is not to deny the existence of structural constraints, which do indeed coerce, constrain, and, in West and Zimmerman's (1987) terms, force individuals to be "accountable" in their gender enactment. And at the same time, in speaking of gender relations, individual agency must also be considered.

The women in my study bring their own identities and understandings of sport and gender to their athletic experiences and relationships with their coaches. It is the way these clearly gendered relations are negotiated and interpreted, given the expectations and constraints of the world in which they are enacted, that I delve into in my research. The following chapter sets out the methodological approach I have taken in order to tackle these processes of negotiation and interpretation.



## **Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A particular methodological approach follows from the theoretical perspective outlined in the preceding chapter. I have suggested that women athletes participate in a sporting world which in many ways epitomizes masculine hegemony. Yet as much current theorizing about gender relations suggests, these women are not inevitably consigned by their gender to passivity and domination. They are active agents who “do gender” in their sporting lives and in their relationships with their male coaches. The gender relations that they enact will be influenced, but not inevitably determined, by the masculine sporting culture in which they are enacted. In my study of women athletes and the men who coach them, I am interested in the extent to which gender relations are shaped by this masculine culture, but also in the way these relations are shaped and interpreted by the women themselves. In the interviews that are the focus of my research, I am aware of the methodological tensions resulting from these interests.

In Neuman’s (1997) terms, my research is in the “critical” paradigm. According to Neuman, researchers should go beyond the “surface illusions” that can be found in respondents’ subjective meanings to the real objective relations and structures of inequality and power (Neuman, 1997: 70-75). By putting the stories into a larger macro historical context, a critical perspective is able to balance the determinism of positivist-based research and the voluntarism of interpretivist research by maintaining that free will

exists for individuals but is constrained by historical conditions and cultural contexts.

For Neuman (1997),

the facts of material conditions are independent of subjective perceptions, but these facts are not theoretically neutral. Facts require interpretation from within a framework of values, theory, and meaning. (Neuman, 1997: 78).

In my case, the framework is explicitly feminist.

But my concern with understanding meanings links my research to an interpretivist framework as well (Neuman, 1997; Schwandt, 1994; Mishler, 1986). I needed to see the interviews unfold as conversations and as such, be empowering experiences whereby the women were encouraged to “find and speak with their own voices” (Mishler, 1986:118). Each interview was an exchange and each question was “part of a circular process through which [the question’s] meaning and that of its answer are created in the discourse between interviewer and respondent as they try to make continuing sense of what they are saying to each other” (Mishler, 1986: 53-54). This *verstehen*, this attempt to get inside the athlete’s viewpoint, was intended as a means to understand how the women defined their reality. In this sense, also, my research is exploratory; I am not testing theory though I do outline at the outset a theoretical framework which shapes the total project. Although the study, given my interview agenda, is hardly grounded theory in the classic sense (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in deriving themes from open-ended questions, that too is part of my context.

### *Locating the researcher*

In identifying the interview as a jointly constructed, “circular” process, it is important that I locate myself in this process. Having participated in provincial, national, and international competitions, I consider my sporting past as one of an elite athlete. And not unlike the women I interviewed, my entire athletic history has been marked by relationships with male coaches. I had a coach who was a constant fixture for me and who made sport intense; he made me believe I had to struggle to be there and that it was always worth the time; and he was a factor in getting me to believe in myself. I will always appreciate that. I had another coach who produced a first-ranked team and then watched as we fell to fourth in the nation; he acknowledged (when it was too late) that he did not use me when the team needed me; he divided those of us who became close friends; he scratched his butt too much; he pushed me to the point of injury; and he was, at least in part, a reason for my leaving that team (not the sport). I suppose our relationship was negative. That has been my reality.

Like the women I interviewed, I have seen or experienced a range of abuses of power by coaches, intimate athlete-coach relationships, playing through injury, the politics of favouritism, the love of the game, the thrill of victory, the push to be like “one of the guys”, as well as sport’s potential for empowerment. Until I started piecing together my current research project, however, this reality was largely unquestioned; it had simply seemed normal and it was what I had come to expect. The education that has given me the insight to question both the “normalness” of my sport history as well as my

understanding of the relationships between women athletes and the men who coach them, now also informs the approach to my research.

The interview guide (including its themes and open-ended style) unfolded in a large part as a result of my literature review and my intentions to gather integrated, lengthy stories from the athletes (not just disjointed excerpts). But the fact is that I too was a female athlete whose sporting relationships were grounded in a similar context to that of the women I was to study – who I was and who I am have come to be inseparable from my research and its aims. Although I was conscious of the fact that I wanted to hear opinions and not shape them, this did not neutralize the experiences and perspectives I brought to the research: all of the athletes' answers depended upon my questions and the fact that I was asking those questions. In fact, for the majority of the women, I initially introduced myself as an athlete when I approached them about taking part in the research. As well, the interviews often ended with an impromptu discussion of my sporting background where I addressed questions like, "Did something happen to you when you trained with a male coach?" or "What were the women like on your team?"

The point is that I did not set out with an agenda that was in response to my experiences. Rather I took on the project simply because it made sense to me, it looked at part of my reality. According to Oakley (1981), this investment of "personal identity" best serves the intentions of qualitative research. Indeed, from the beginning my project has avoided a neutral, objective, and detached approach to data collection and analysis that perpetuates the view of the interview as a value-free stimulus-response exchange and which divides the researcher and respondent along hierarchical lines. I did not approach

the interview as a controlled one-way process nor the women as passive objects who resigned “discoverable truths” over to me for interpretation. Rather, I tried to recognize the contextual grounding that informed and framed my study while situating myself as a contributor in the creation of meaning within the interview – I have been a participant, not an outsider, in the production of my findings.

Methodologically, the most appropriate tool to implement such an approach was a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview was, on the one hand, aimed specifically at addressing issues that were theoretically informed, while also leaving the format relatively open to allow new issues to emerge. With this limited structure I could delve into the women’s judgments and relationships from several angles, while having the questions open-ended allowed for the women to follow their own agendas and express what came to mind. The narratives of these women are important in and of themselves, but for my research, the text has to be read from a perspective that attends both to the particular gendered context in which the relationships being discussed are taking place, and also to the meanings the women in my study give them.

### **The Interview**

The interview guide constitutes Appendix A. The first section of the interview (a. Athletic Career) was geared toward outlining the athletes’ demographics; identifiers that would allow me to categorize according to age, stage of athletic career, and sport. Upon re-examining the interview draft, I realized that some athletes may have only worked with one varsity coach or that the impressions made by a second varsity coach may have

paled in comparison to a club coach. As a result, I modified question a4 and gave the women the option of discussing a varsity coach and one other, varsity or non-varsity. All did focus on at least one of their coaches at university, and from there, 18 chose to speak of a club coach. Question a5 was directed at uncovering not only the athletes' assessments of success and failure but also how they felt their performances might have changed with certain coaches and what they were expecting of the coaches.

The section that followed (b. Issues of Power and Control) was set up to elicit details regarding the behavior of the coaches and the interaction between the coaches and athletes. I felt it was imperative that the women relay what their coach did, if and/or under what circumstances his actions changed, and how communication unfolded in the relationship. Questions b4 and b5 were added after the 15th interview as I noted that the women, although thorough in explaining what a coach did, were not consistently saying what they felt they *needed* from their coaches. And perhaps one of the most telling questions was b6 which asked the athletes to make a succinct judgment in terms of the overall relationship – I wanted to balance these answers against the entire interviews. Finally, question b7 urged the athletes to hypothesize about sport and life without those coaches, and was an example of taking a different means to the same end; in a less direct way I was trying to gauge the coaches' impact on the athletes.

Section c (Issues of Gender and Sexuality) went through several transformations during the interview period. After three interviews I revamped c1 of the original draft to more directly attack issues of physicality and body image, to build an avenue for comparison between the views of coaches and athletes, and as well bring a better

understanding of what elite female athleticism entailed – questions c1, c2, c3, and c4 emerged. The rest of the original draft stayed essentially intact, addressing the idea of a perfect coach and how each man measured up to that ideal with questions aimed directly at the athletes and others which asked the women how they would feel if they had children who were training with that coach. This question regarding children had a two-fold aim: to see whether the women believed the coach would be different or better with men versus women athletes, and as well, to see if the athletes thought men and women experience sport differently. The notion of “measuring up”, which at times seemed monotonous when used in the interview, was a tool for me to ensure comparisons were being made between the athletes’ meanings and what they felt the coach believed. All of the questions from a5 through to c11a (excluding c1, c3, and c7) were repeated for each coach being discussed. I used c12 through c19 (which were added after the fifth interview) as the concluding section, on several occasions skipping questions because of time constraints or simply because the issues had been previously addressed. By inquiring about quitting, sacrifices, and what kept the athletes in sport, I was again tapping into how these women conceived women’s athleticism. The other questions at the end of the interview guide were intended to provide another perspective on how the women interpreted the coach-athlete relationship. However, the open-ended nature of the questions and my willingness to follow up on topics emerging from the discussion or introduced by the women, ensured that other issues could be incorporated as well.

## **The Sample**

Believing that the high level of competition in intercollegiate athletics translated into the sport and subsequently the coach having played significant roles in women's athletic careers, I decided I wanted to talk to women varsity athletes who had worked with men as coaches (as I understood that more often women are coached by men at this level). My search began in the University Archives at the U of C. There, I was disappointed to find that no formalized records of the university's sporting history existed. In turn, I simplified my approach, combing the U of C calendar and the athletic department and found that because I wanted to focus on national level varsity athletics (Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU)) I would be limited to women training in soccer, track and field, swimming, basketball, cross-country, volleyball, and field hockey. (I felt that national level sport would be more highly regarded by both the university and sport followers so I abandoned looking at gymnastics and tennis athletes who competed only in western Canadian championships (Canadian Western University Athletic Association -- CWUAA)). Information from the Department of Kinesiology further restricted my options as I discovered that basketball, volleyball, and field hockey had women coaches returning to the teams, while soccer, track and field, and swimming had men returning to positions that have long been held by male coaches (information regarding cross-country was inconsistent as far as coaching). What this translated into was the reality that soccer and track and field (and later, swimming) provided the best current and past membership lists of women athletes who had worked with men as coaches. And although my pursuit of soccer, track and field, and swimming athletes was



at least in part determined by this elimination process, I maintain that each of these three sports represents a significant place in Canadian athletics, and ultimately a relevant object of study. In fact, Canadian women have been competing in track and field at the Olympics since it was first introduced for women in 1928. At the U of C, there has been intercollegiate competition in women's track and field since 1979 and currently, Dino women hold 14 CIAU national track and field records and have combined points in 1989, 1991, and 1993 to win the conference championships. And although soccer does not have the same history as track and field, it has recently become part of the mainstream of women's sport. A few years after the introduction of women's soccer into the U of C's varsity athletics in 1984, the international scene was strengthened in 1991 with the first ever FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) women's world championship and in 1996 with women's soccer becoming sanctioned as a regular part of the Summer Olympic Games<sup>5</sup>. The swimming team has an impressive history of achievements, producing a number of women Olympic competitors over the years. There were other good reasons for the selection of athletes in soccer, track, and swimming. I wanted a sample that was composed of women from both individual and team sports so as to address any distinctions that might arise in the interactions between coaches and athletes who train more for self-improvement and personal attainment, compared to the exchanges between coaches and athletes who are concerned specifically with team-directed development and accomplishments. In distinguishing between the two types of sports, I conceptualized an individual sport as one defined by solo performances in

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<sup>5</sup> During the 1998 season, the women's varsity team became the first soccer squad at the U of C (men's or women's) to win the CIAU championship.

which each athlete is scored separately. Conversely, team sports were characterized by a cooperative element between two or more players who have immediate contact with an opposition. Following this reasoning, track and field and soccer, respectively, seemed very well suited for my research. My decision to include swimming athletes (as part of individual sport) came about after several interviews and with the realization that I was depleting my list of contacts with few new names being brought forth. I did not want to exhaust the limited number of eligible soccer and track athletes still in Calgary and thought my sample would be more representative if it was compiled from a greater variety of sports and athletes. I felt the inclusion of swimmers would also supplement my findings on athletes in an individual sport.

My decision to look at women who competed during the 1990s was simple; I wanted the information to be contemporary while establishing a large enough time span (as long as the athletes competed into 1990 or beyond, until spring 1997) from which to derive a substantial population, and hence a sample. To further limit the years of participation would have significantly reduced the number of possible interviewees and likewise the number of different varsity coaches. As well, exploring the experiences of women with varsity backgrounds that spanned from the late 1980s through the 1990s allowed the development of their athletic careers to be studied; I wanted to delve into both the evolution of athletic careers (from rookies, to veterans, to past Dinos who continued to compete, and through to the truly retired athletes), and into how the athletes' perceptions may have changed over time.

In focusing on the perspective that age gives, my original contention was that the former Dinos would be distanced enough to be comfortable and critical in speaking about their relationship with their coaches, while a similar distance could be contrived with the current Dinos by conducting the interviews during the off-seasons (which essentially coincided with my interviewing period from March through September). What I did not expect to find was so many athletes (21 out of 32, including six past Dinos) competing at the club level<sup>6</sup>, generally during the university's off-season. And of those 21 athletes, 20 were currently training with a coach to whom they referred in the interviews (current coaches). As such, I was not able to truly find this "distance" as several "retired" athletes were still competing and the "off-season" did not apply as so many women continued to train with club teams. There were, however, never any allusions made or signs given by the women that they were at all uncomfortable in reflecting upon a current relationship with a coach; all athletes seemed very willing and forthright in assessing their experiences, regardless of whether they continued to train with the coach in question.

### *The women*

Prospective interviewees were traced through the Alumni Affairs office which was able to compile a list of athletes (from soccer, track and field, and later swimming) who had recently completed degrees (followed by year of graduation) at the U of C, or had at one time attended the U of C. From a few initial contacts derived from the alumni

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<sup>6</sup> Calgary has several club teams for soccer, track, as well as swimming. The club teams are distinct from varsity, but often include several members from university teams. Competition at the club level is as high, if not higher, than that of the CIAU. In fact, clubs compete on a provincial, national, and international scale and were often considered training grounds for

list, my research unfolded as a snowball sample; the women were very willing to provide me with the names and telephone numbers of current as well as retired teammates. I interviewed 32 women in total, ranging in age from 18 to 34 with approximately two-thirds of the women falling in a category of 25 years and younger. The following table outlines some of the details regarding the athletes distribution among the three sports:

**Table 1**

	soccer	track	swimming	total
Number of athletes	14	11	7	32
Number of athletes competing during 96-97 (current/continuing Dino)	7	7	4	18
Number of athletes having ended varsity career prior to 96-97 (retired/past Dino)	7	4	3	14

It should be noted that of the 18 current Dinos, two were first year rookies, six were second-years, five were third-years, one was fourth-year, and four athletes had just completed their fifth and final year of eligibility. Conversely, of the 14 women who had moved beyond their university athletic careers, six continued to compete at the club level, leaving only eight women who had truly retired from competitive sport. Two of the 32 athletes were never Dinos but did compete in the CIAU through another university. As well, Calgary eventually came to be the training base for both women later on in their careers (at the club level). I believed that because they were involved in Canadian varsity athletics and did indeed experience elite sport in Calgary, the experiences of these women would not have been substantively or culturally unrepresentative when compared to the other athletes. Another departure from my original sampling criteria came with one

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national and Olympic athletes.

interview as I came to understand, only after the interview began, that she was a varsity athlete only until 1989. She did however, continue to compete in a club at a very elite level during the 1990s. I concluded and ultimately included the interview in my analysis on the basis that references to this athlete in no way altered the character of my sample nor presented a sporting history that was fundamentally different from those women who were varsity athletes in the 1990s.

*In terms of the coach-athlete relationships, 22 different male coaches were discussed in detail; 13 were varsity coaches, nine were strictly club level coaches. Two athletes spoke of only one significant man as coach (one woman was constrained by time, while the other spoke of a woman coach as her second significant coaching influence). Five actually spoke of three male coaches, while the remaining 25 discussed two relationships with men. (It should be noted that the coaches themselves offered a variety of backgrounds and experience levels. Some coaches had a history with Olympic athletes, others were national team or provincial team coaches, some were retired as varsity level coaches or were simply high school coaches, while still others were just starting out and had very little in terms of coaching experience).*

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before undertaking my study, I first had to obtain approval from the Committee on the Ethics of Human Studies within my department. Together with my research proposal, I submitted to the committee both a request for approval that briefly outlined my project objectives and aims, the subjects being considered, and the details regarding

the disposition of the data, as well as a copy of the consent form that would be given to each athlete to sign prior to the interview (Appendix B). In response to this initial request for ethics approval, I was required by the committee to consult with appropriate counseling and support services in order to prepare myself should any of the athletes have been adversely affected by what was exposed in the interviews, and as well prepare these services so they could anticipate possible referrals. Accordingly, I investigated the services available at the U of C and was directed to Shirley Voyna-Wilson (Sexual Harassment Advisor at the U of C) with whom I spoke on two occasions in December, 1996. She explained that if an athlete appeared to be a victim of sexual harassment, my role was to become one of a referral agent. As well, I wrote to and met with Dr. Sharon Crozier in University Counselling in January, 1997. Dr. Crozier's advice mirrored that of Ms. Voyna-Wilson's and more generally outlined that I was to reassure an athlete that such services can help and that they can be short-term, rather than long-term commitments. Beyond the U of C, I contacted three agencies in Calgary, outlined my research for them, and was assured that they were willing to counsel any of the athletes I interviewed. (It should be noted that none of the athletes asked me for such help, nor did any seem to indicate that they wanted me to get involved with any issues they may have been dealing with). I then attached the names and numbers of all these counseling services to the finalized consent form given to each athlete. The ethics committee granted approval of my research proposal in February, 1997<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> I conformed to the letter, as well as the spirit of the ethical requirements of the study in all but one respect. The consent form stated that as a measure to gain anonymity, I would not refer to the years that the athletes played nor to their ages. However, with my analysis, it became clear that many insights would be meaningless without framing them in some perspective of time (ie.

## Procedures

I first contacted each woman by telephone, explained my research project, and offered them the opportunity to be part of it. Only two women declined to participate, in both cases because they were leaving the city. Overall, the women's responses to my request for an interview were positive. Interviewing began in March, 1997 and was concluded in September, 1997. Problems arose with three interview tapes that were in part, inaudible. I was, however, able to contact the three athletes involved and subsequently repeated the sections of the interview that were affected (all questions dealt with the second coach being discussed). In each case, I believe the athletes' responses were as unrehearsed and honest as in the original discussions (allusions were made to their remembering what they had said in the past, making note that their perceptions had remained unchanged). Two of the interviews were conducted in the athletes' homes as they requested, one was arranged at a local sports centre which was more convenient for the athlete, and the remaining interviews, including the three follow-ups, were held in my office in the Sociology department.

After each interview I reflected upon what was said and kept a journal which outlined how I felt about the interview, the impression the athlete left, and where I thought things could be improved upon (which ultimately led to the revisions made to the interview guide). This ritual allowed me to look back and remember the faces and

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making references to "rookies" or "fifth year veterans"). As a result, I decided not to include details of age or years of competition with information that would disclose the sport the athlete participated in (ie. references to the pool, track, or defenders). In that way, I was able to include age and years of competition which strengthened or clarified my analysis, without identifying the

demeanors of the women – it really connected the athletes with their stories and ultimately my findings back to the women. I began transcribing the cassette tapes shortly after completing the first few interviews and would periodically stop the interviewing process in order to keep up with the transcriptions – I wanted to be up to date on what was being said before undertaking further discussions with other athletes. I transcribed the tapes verbatim, partly because I wanted to avoid obscuring the text and what the athletes had intended to say, and partly because at the time I had no idea what may have been frivolous or irrelevant material. Upon completing all the transcripts, I traced where I had implemented changes to questions or made omissions, and decided that the interviews were consistently targeting the same issues – I did not believe it would be necessary to contact the athletes a second time because of a few missed questions. I went with what I had.

### ***Data analysis***

Because I was following established questions I was imposing certain themes for my research to follow – issues regarding compulsory heterosexuality, gender, power and control, coaching ideals, masculine hegemony, and body images. However, in taking a critical approach, I set up the questions so that the athletes could draw from an array of experiences in trying to formulate answers (and as well, I refrained from interrupting the athletes and rather paused and waited for comments). As a result, the women provided information that corresponded to the themes I had originally intended, but as well, allowed other issues to emerge. This is how my analysis unfolded; moving from notes

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athletes.



made on the most basic ideas like how the coach behaved, how the athletes saw themselves, and the image of an ideal coach, through to the patterns that started to emerge when I looked more deeply at what the women were saying. What emerged as new themes were the notion of self-defined athletic ideals; the sexualization and trivialization of women in sport by coaches and the women themselves; the importance of friendship; the surrender and resistance to authority; as well as the acceptance that sport participation is a compromise. Gender, power, and sexuality, of course, were self-evident themes that I had set out to address; how they unfolded and were defined, however, was due to what the women said. The themes are explored in the presentation of findings from the interviews in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Findings**

The interviews conducted for this study provided a rich source of data on the topics raised in the interview guide. But new issues and concerns were also raised. In general, it was possible to organize the data in two main areas: the women's perceptions of themselves as athletes and their understanding of women's athleticism; and their interpretations of their relationships with the men who coached them. It is under these two headings that the themes generated by the data analysis are discussed.

### **The Women as Athletes: Perceptions of Themselves and their Sport**

It was an undisclosed path that brought these women to sport as no one spoke of idols or inspirations or the following of foot steps -- the roots were left hidden. As current or past university athletes, the women were years beyond their introduction to athleticism. The fact was that all of the women were veteran athletes to some degree – what was important then, was not how they got to the athletic arena, but what it was that kept them there and how the “female athlete” had come to be defined through their athletic careers.

### ***Performance***

The women in the study included Olympic athletes and medalists; carded<sup>8</sup> members of the national team; provincial and national champions; record holders;

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<sup>8</sup> To become carded, an athlete must compete in a sport recognized by Sport Canada. There are different levels of carding (ie. A, B, C, C1, training, and injury) that are assessed according to the

recipients of the Canada-West all-star and rookie of the year awards; Pan-Am, Student World, and Commonwealth Games participants and medalists, Canada-West and Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU) competitors, finalists, and champions; and members of consistently winning teams as well as up and coming stars. At the very least, each of these women competed as a Canadian varsity athlete and as such could be considered a “successful” athlete. Reflecting on her career, Karla<sup>9</sup>, a retired athlete, remarked:

I honestly excelled more ... than I ever thought I would. I honestly never thought I'd ever make Junior nationals and I did and I made nationals which I never thought I would. I never made the Olympic team but I was very pleased with how far I got. I do remember feeling good about my results.... I did so well in taking my [sport] as far as I could.... I had gone as far as I could.

What was significant about Karla's statement was not her list of accomplishments but rather that her experience with university sport was both fulfilling and complete. She was the only athlete to maintain a consistently positive appraisal of her performance throughout the interview. In general, the women had little to say regarding their achievements; they spoke much more frequently about a need to improve their performances and of the times they had fallen short of their expectations. Most, like Lynn, spoke of their limitations. Despite having held a decade-long national title and being ranked within the top 10 in the world, she commented, “I never made the 1984 Olympic team ... I still feel like a failure.” Similarly, Maureen, who was still a varsity

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athletes' ranking in the world (based on number of world championships, placing at world championships and the Olympic Games). As well, with the distinctions in carding there are also differences in the monetary sponsorship given to the athletes. Carded athletes have tuition waved (at least in part) when attending post-secondary institutions.

<sup>9</sup> The names of interviewees have been changed in the interests of preserving confidentiality.

athlete, said, “You get to this age and it’s not good enough, it’s never good enough with yourself. I know with me, I’ve never been good enough.” Such comments suggested that sporting achievement alone was not what kept the women in sport.

### *Sport as reward*

Success did figure prominently for a number of women as a factor in extending their athletic careers. When asked what kept her in sport, Lynn, who was ranked internationally at one time, responded immediately: “Success. Success breeds motivation”. In a similar vein, other women spoke of how making “firsts” (ie. qualifying for nationals for the first time), the winning, the awards, the personal bests, the sense of accomplishment, and the recognition from other people that they were “good”, all kept them coming back. However, there were also more pragmatic reasons that kept the athletes competing. Ashley, a varsity track athlete who had two years of eligibility left, declared:

Sometimes it’s just the money; I’m getting money to run for the U of C ... sometimes I think “oh, I can’t do this anymore” and then it’s “Ash, you’re getting money, keep going”.

Janet spoke of “aesthetic reasons, keeping in shape and being athletic”. For others, it was simply the traveling they experienced as university athletes. Such tangible and practical benefits were never the sole force that continually brought these athletes back to their sport but scholarships, physical development, and adventure perks were repeatedly noted.

Several women felt athletics had come to be a positive force in their lives more generally. For one athlete, swimming kept her organized and made her confident, while

another was provided with a balance in her life as sport was an outlet for her. For others, sport was a means of getting frustrations out and relieving stress. The most commonly recorded benefit of sport, however, were the friendships that athletic participation facilitated – more than a third of the athletes offered “friendship” as a principal link in what kept them coming back. Several of them claimed their best friends were on their team. As Karla explained, “The social side of it really makes the struggling easier, when you have friends who have to do the same thing.” It was about sharing the game and pursuing the same passion. The overall sense was that the athletes were gaining so much from their participation and that was why they continued to compete. The rewards of sport went far beyond the immediacy of training and competition.

### ***Emotional ties to the sport***

It was not only the rewards like those just described that kept these women in athletics, however. The seemingly more seductive tie was an emotional one: their passion for the sport itself. Part of this passion related to competition; the struggle and not the outcome; the means and not the end; the road *to* success. For almost half of the women it was competitiveness that connected them to sport. Jodi, who had just completed her last year of eligibility, summed up what kept her in soccer with the response: “It’s the competitiveness ... the idea that you can get one step better”.

The emotional connection to sport for the majority of women however, did go well beyond competitive struggles. In short, they loved their sport and that is what kept

them competing. And although the athletes' descriptions generally faded after "I love it", three comments from current Dinos offered more potent illustrations of that love:

The love of the sport. I've always loved the water ...just the sound of the water rushing past your ears. In a way, it's peaceful. [Gail, a former Olympian swimmer];

I love the sport... sometimes I don't feel like playing ... but as soon as you step on the field it all just goes away. That I love. I love that part of the game. [Fiona, a veteran soccer player];

and,

Even things like when spring comes and you can smell the grass cut -- it's just in you -- your love for it. [Jodi, a fifth year soccer player].

The impression left by these women, and in fact most of the women, was that they felt sport *gave* to them. Only Nat, a former soccer player, mentioned that she stayed in sport in part because of what she, herself, was contributing to soccer. When asked what kept her in sport, she noted:

I start playing against these younger girls who are so good and it just warms your heart to think that I was one of the older girls growing up in Canada and playing soccer. And when you do well, it filters down slowly but surely to the minor leagues and you see them developing and it warms your heart to see these 13- and 14-year-olds and you just know that they're going to get better and you know that you had some part in that.

She believed she had a role in shaping female athleticism and that was part of *her* reason for staying athletic.

### ***Prescriptions for the athletic ideal***

Amidst the diversity of athletes and stories there did emerge a distinct, complex,

and largely consistent image of what the female athlete “ought” to be – the measure against which they implicitly and explicitly judged themselves. In terms of an ideal physicality, there was a marked absence of emphasis on stature and build. Only Julie, a retired athlete, outlined what an ideal athlete should look like: “tall, slender, very muscular”. (She commented later how she was herself “way off” that mark). The other athletes simply could not envision an ideal shape, maintaining that there was no optimum standard, and that size, fat percentage, and build had to be individualized. Ellen, a Dino swimmer contended, “There’s a certain range of fat percent where [athletes] do their best at... it doesn’t necessarily have to be lean. Some people -- it has to be pretty high for them to do their best.... There’s not a given range where you have to be.” Alli, a former track athlete noted, “If you’re running fast, who cares about your weight?” The measure of what an athlete “ought” to be appeared only marginally linked to what the body looked like.

In terms of what was needed beyond physical qualities, several athletes responded simply with “the mental”. Repeatedly, allusions were made to the mental strength that an athlete ought to have, and often had to have. For Ellen, a distance swimmer, it meant she had to be “crazy -- you spend so much time by yourself going back and forth.” Being able to deal with competition was construed by several women as an overwhelmingly psychological obstacle. As someone with more than a decade of elite experience, Kate explained, “It’s 90 per cent [mental]. Once you get into a meet, it’s such a mental game that you’re fighting.” Athletes in track, swimming, and soccer all pointed to the need to accept the frustrations and “get over” the disappointments and losses. Michelle, a track

athlete, reflected the views of several women in defining what shaped an ideal athlete:

“Definitely mental – being able to focus, knowing what you want and being goal-oriented and driven. Anyone can do anything if they really want to.”

What seemed to be more important than physical build and mental strength were the codes of behavior that defined a kind of athletic integrity. For many of the women, to work hard, to push the limits and the potentials of their bodies, was key in an ideal athlete. Dedication to training was the guarantee an athlete would attain a figure that could be defined as athletic, whatever its actual form. Athletes commented: “If you work hard, you get hard”; “If you’re dedicated you’re going to have the physique you need to perform well.” According to Jessica, who was captain of her team at one time, talent and skill were not enough to stand as the measure of ideal athleticism: “You can be a great player, but if you’re not dedicated, I think it shows in your game.” Even for one woman who knew her athletic reputation would be enough to get her on a club team, she still wanted to prove, by working hard, that she deserved to be there. She commented, “I don’t want to be guaranteed a spot -- I’d rather earn it.” The number of women interviewed who claimed they worked hard illustrated the importance of the work ethic. In explaining how they performed, how they acted around their coaches, and how they measured up to their coaches’ expectations, the women argued that they “gave 100 per cent,” worked their “butts off”, played hard, were good trainers, and gave it their all. When that work ethic was lacking, athletes like Nat saw that as a problem:

The ultimate consequence is that you don’t win, or you don’t succeed. But for a lot of girls, that’s “so what?” And I have a hard time with that. Either you want to drive and succeed or you don’t .... If I get beat on the



field, if I get skinned<sup>10</sup> or somebody goes by me, I really take that personally, it's an embarrassment. If I can walk off the field and honestly say that I couldn't have done anything more, then that's fine .... I know that there are people that don't work as hard as me or other girls and I don't respect them .... They're losers on the field and they're going to be losers in life.

Athletic integrity also meant for some women that no matter how hard they had to struggle, they never thought of quitting. To quit seemed to be equated with conceding defeat; defeat seemed to be interpreted as "unathletic". Gail reflected upon her career:

I thought "Oh, I don't know if I can do this anymore." But in the back of my mind I wanted to prove something -- to myself, to achieve my goals. I always thought there was more to do .... I can't stop until I feel I've done what I wanted to do.

Similarly, Lynn pointed to "the drive, not wanting to give up" as essential in the make-up of the athletic ideal. Conversely, quitting for some women was a way of actually preserving their athletic integrity. For Kate, who was proud of her past career and who was now training to re-enter the competitive circuit, quitting crossed her mind as a way to save a respectable reputation that she had built up years before.

I didn't know if I wanted to come back. I didn't want to do "Mickey Mouse" and not do well. After you've been at such a level, to come back and just fool around and not do well -- I don't know if I could do that.

Maureen, a current Dino, was even more convinced that quitting was a display of athletic integrity.

I know there's going to be a point where I say, "Forget it, I'm done." I don't want to be one of those players that I'm 28 -- I mean that's supposed to be your peak level but I don't believe that .... But if I'm that age and I feel that I fade and that I'm eventually going to be in Premier and then Division 1<sup>11</sup> .... If I see myself sagging I'm just going to drop it like that.

<sup>10</sup> In soccer, to lose possession of the ball to an opponent during the play is to be "skinned".

<sup>11</sup> Premier is the highest division in club soccer; Division 1 is a level below; followed by Division

I don't want to be remembered as the "sagging off" player.

However, the most emphasized requirement of athletic integrity that defined the ideal athlete was something they called "heart". As a few athletes contended, heart was something that could not be taught, but was innate for an athlete. Fiona, a veteran of varsity soccer, argued that "heart" was the distinguishing trait that brought respect to an athlete:

People need to have a lot of heart... and depth and ... class in the sense that you don't want to get beat.... It's the most important game of the year and you can't get up for it. I think that sucks. I don't know how to fix that but I think that that's inside.

Kim, who was also a veteran athlete, echoed the impact "heart" had on developing athleticism:

That's really what ties skills together, the push to really want to make it work. You can't really prove anything when you don't put in the heart.

### ***The body-mind connection***

The women in this study also pointed out the powerful connection between the physical and mental dimensions of athleticism. The athletes repeatedly pointed to how their physicality (ie. their bodies, the techniques, their training, and their performances) was inextricably linked to their psychological state – how they performed affected their mental state and their mental state affected how they performed. In some instances the body-mind connection followed a simple path. This was the case for current Dino athlete Michelle who said, "When I've had a good race, my thoughts are very positive. 'I'm

going to do this and I love track and I want to prove how well I've trained.'" Physical gains seemed to translate into mental victories. Conversely, for several athletes shortcomings in performance had psychological effects. Kim, reflecting on her failure to make the national team, stated:

I've probably lost a lot of heart ... I don't know if, maybe some of it, I was a little jealous of Deb when I found out she had made it all the way... Just knowing how I could measure up to those players on the national team ... maybe I lost a lot of that. Winning has never been important .... I kind of got used to [losing], but I think it's getting to me now.

For Kim, there was a direct line from her failures in performance to her psychological reaction. However, for most of the women, this body-to-mind connection was a constant, reciprocal exchange. Ellen, a swimmer, commented on this complex cycle:

The first year was an Olympic year so I was motivated and centered then and – that just wore on me too much and I was just drained after. I missed the Olympic team and I think I needed more time to just relax and get over that and chill out. But we started up again right after that so we didn't have time to forget about that.... all that training .... And having everyone pump you up to make it, and then you feel like you've let down yourself, you let down your coach, you let down your family.... and having to get geared up for it again and try to go all out again and then not making it again. Then still having to train equally as hard -- for four times it was just way too much. Mentally and physically.

For others, physical potential was controlled and often frustrated by the athletes' mental condition as swimming athlete Janet found:

Mentally – that was kind of where I had problems.... I was training hard and beating all these people in work out and then I'd get to the race and I'd swim just as fast as I had been, but I couldn't get further ... and I couldn't figure out what to do --- there was some barrier I couldn't get past.

### *The “suck it up” ethic*

Pain and injury were integral parts of each athlete’s experience, whatever their sport. The few who noted that injuries had held them back from training or competition, or that they had struggled with their bodies’ limits coming back off an injury seemed surprised that injury had actually affected their performance. In most cases, athletes simply “worked through it”, “got used to it”, “learned to play with it”, and “expected it”. As Maureen, a rookie, understood it, “you have to sacrifice your body” in order to compete. These women endured shoulder strains, groin injuries, a disjointed pelvis, chronic back injuries, pulled hamstrings, sprained ankles, plantar fasciitis<sup>12</sup>, degenerative back disks, irreparable damage to ACLs and PCLs<sup>13</sup>, and an array of stretched ligaments and weakened joints while competing; pain and injury were thoroughly normalized. According to Traci, “you take eight ibuprofen and anti-inflammatories and you run”. Sue recalled staying on the field to play after pulling a hamstring:

I could hardly walk and I didn’t leave. I still thought I could make a difference.

Pain and injury became part of the performance. Jessica, a veteran athlete, was very clear in her understanding of pain in sport:

It’s just part of the game... I find that some people are a lot more wimpy about it. And I think you just have to play with it. Not many games am I 100 percent and I think a lot of the other girls play with injuries.

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<sup>12</sup> Plantar fasciitis is damage to the plantar fascia (the inelastic fibrous band extending from the heel to the toes).

<sup>13</sup> ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) and PCL (posterior cruciate ligament) both refer to ligaments in the knee.

Simply put “if you don’t play at all, then you’re hurt”. Conversely it seemed, if you were playing, the existence of pain or injury had to be denied. The message, repeatedly, was to “suck it up”.

### ***“Athlete” as identity***

Undoubtedly, each women saw herself as an athlete. What was interesting was the degree to which some of the women adopted “athlete” as their identity. On one end of the spectrum, there was Lynn who drew a sharp distinction between her athletic personality and her identity outside of sport:

I didn’t have a very high self-esteem outside of track. It’s funny because if you would have known me outside of track I was so quiet and shy and didn’t say too much. And people would be shocked to think --- how I could be so aggressive on the track and ruthless and be such a pushover when it came to being off the track. And the guys I went out with too, some of them were actually quite abusive and you know, why would you take that outside when on the track you were exactly the opposite?

More often the women discussed how their athleticism became part of their overall character. Ties to sport seemed to become innate, almost natural, and some athletes felt “lost” when they were not training. Maureen talked of how something felt “wrong” when she was not competing: “I always have to stay in it .... I have to keep going. It’s almost compulsive --- it’s just a part of you.” Sue found that with her sport and her team “it was a counter culture ... we had our own language, our own ideas, and I played with my circle of friends, they were my community.” Having sport become such an influence in their lives was welcomed by many women. Colleen commented:

If it were up to me I think everyone should do something athletic, something competitive, and I think it gives me a different perspective and

a different outlook, and that's invaluable. I think if everyone had the mindset of an athlete, the world would be a much happier place.

At the furthest extreme was Michelle who seemed defined by sport, whose athletic identity became her entire identity.

It's how people identify me. All the people are like "there's the track chicks" so like I'm a "track chick". If I quit track, what would I be?

### *Defining femininity*

According to many of the women interviewed, a fundamental characteristic of athletic women was their sensitivity. Approximately half of the athletes made references to the idea that women in sport were emotional. In some instances, it was unclear whether they viewed this sensitivity positively, or wished for something different. There was a sense, though, that this was simply the way sporting women were. As Alli remarked:

Sometimes the coach wouldn't understand --- that you do work so hard and you do try so hard and then you have a shitty race and sometimes -- it's a female reaction -- you cry.

As well, the athletes compared the men's sporting world with their own. According to Gail, a former Olympian who was just finishing her fifth year of varsity sport, and who had had a lengthy career training with very elite athletes, both men and women:

When a guy is put up to a challenge, he takes it as a challenge, it's fun, and they're really competitive and [her coach] can motivate that. Where I think women tend not to be as outright and competitive and I think day in day out training that way, it's almost stressful, intimidating for them. I think there are ways of challenging yourself personally. I know with my other coach, he'd give me a time that I had to do or a pace time that I had to handle and it was myself swimming, individually.... he'd put a challenge to you personally of what to

do and he wouldn't play those games. And I think that women are self determined, but maybe not as outright with it, they're more internally driven.

In a similar vein, Trina, a soccer athlete, noted:

The guys' team can yell and swear at each other during practice ... and then go have a beer. And the coach can yell and scream at them and they can scream back and then they're buddy-buddy after. Guys are really different in that respect, in that they leave it on the field. Girls are very personal and they take it home with them.

As a swimmer, Karla held the opinion that "women are much more sensitive to pain and weight issues, there's a whole image thing that I don't think men really deal with." These comments were *describing* the female athlete's reality, not necessarily *judging* it.

However, several athletes were much more critical of "women's nature" in sport as being too reactive. According to soccer athlete Fiona, coaching "would be easier with guys – there's less bickering and emotions than with women I think". Other women made the point that while such characterizations of femininity could describe their teammates, they themselves were different. Jessica contended:

Some girls can take it and some can't, that's how it is for women's sport, that's what I've noticed. There are certain girls on our team that will break down and cry if he yells at them. I personally like it when he yells at me ... But some girls take it to heart and they take it too personally.

The message apparently was that there was an imbalance; that there was too much emotion. And this was reiterated with comparisons to men in sport. As one athlete explained:

I've always found that guys will say... "you suck" and girls can't say that to girls because it's totally different and girls will be girls. And with guys you can say it really quick and it's ok.... The whole mental toughness thing -- girls don't have it a lot of the time and guys do.

The image suggested with these comments was a negative one – it was about what men could take and women could not; what men could do and women could not; about what men have and women do not. Female athletes were somehow failing. Saying that women “can’t take it” meant that someone else can take it – in effect, that “taking it” was the norm. Female athleticism seemed inherently weak or simply, less.

Some of the women faced imposed evaluations from others that trivialized the woman athlete. Jacqueline found that varsity referees did not take women’s soccer seriously, referring to the women as “girls” and being patronizing, acting as if the women players were “demeaning the sport”. Of her childhood, playing on a boy’s team, she recalled:

If you scored, it wasn’t “she’s really good” it’s “she’s an exceptional girl” or “she’s the exception” or “she’s not like other girls”. I’m sure if a lot of girls had as much experience playing with other boys, they could have achieved the same level, but it was always “you’re different”. I was always different, I wasn’t a normal girl.

In a related situation, Gail was confronted by a coach who said, “I don’t know why you’re going out there, because all the women’s team is good for is servicing the men”. She commented: “So that was apparently the sort of reputation the women’s team had before I came out here... I had different ideas.” Again the athlete was opposed to others’ opinions of women in athletics. Current Dino Monica stated, “Women athletes are not as well accepted by society --- on the sport pages in the Herald we’re hardly ever talked about.”



However, other women were much more accepting of the view that women's status and their abilities as athletes were "inevitably" less than men's. Nicole commented:

It's easier for men to do that training --- it's almost like they know they have a right to be there, so they really don't have to prove themselves as much. [Women can prove themselves] just through dedication, coming out all the time, working hard. In track there's an obvious difference between males and females and their abilities -- and even a female who achieves a lot in her sport, in practice she won't be running as fast as a guy, even though she's doing better than him in competitions. I think just showing that you go to practice every day and that you do the best you can, even though you're not keeping up with all the guys.

Similarly, Janet observed:

You kind of always suck compared to the guys -- that's always the more exciting. And with the women's, especially here at the university, the men's team is so elite and has always been such a power house; women's has always been second best. You've got to be pretty motivated and proud of your team and your part, to work through it. Not being as important and toughing it out.

A related impression created by a small number of the athletes was that women athletes should somehow have expected "less", somehow needed "less". Jane commented that she would have no problem if a daughter of hers played for her old coach, but then went on to say, regarding a son,

No, I'd want [him to train with] someone else. [Her coach] is the type of coach that is good for women, girls. He'd get pushed around by guys, they wouldn't listen to him at all ... He wouldn't get the respect.

Sue came to the same conclusion regarding her former coach:

These guys just wouldn't respect [him]. Because of his knowledge, because of who he is, what he's like. Eighteen-year-old girls all their lives have been pushed around so when

they get to this level and they see the older girls, [him] beckoning them up to the front of the bus to come speak to him, what are they going to do, they're going to go, they're going to listen to the guy. And with guys, they're like, "Why do you listen to the guy? He's an idiot, he's a clown." Well, he's our coach. It just wouldn't work out. There were many times when I did wonder about the differences, like why don't we say, "What's with this guy?" And I don't really know the answer to that.

This idea that women were more "manageable" was not presented in a positive light.

Indeed, it seemed to convey the message that women could be satisfied with less; a coach less deserving of respect was acceptable for a woman, not a man. An explicit example of an athlete believing that women needed less came from Sandra who, when asked about a daughter training with her coach, said, "It would be great, definitely. He's a good coach and could take her pretty far." Her response when asked about a son playing for that same coach was as follows: "No, I would want a little more for my son ... maybe he would be good at a younger level, but I don't think at the university level." Essentially, it appeared that a son was expected to go farther. The inescapable correlation was that *women deserved less*.

In contrast to the foregoing, there were others who applauded the cooperative, expressive, and tough character of women athletes. Purely positive constructions of women, even in relation to men athletes, came from women like Gail who said:

Women make a great team, even more so than men; men are so competitive that they're competitive within their own team. Each individual will pull their own part to provide an environment where they're working together on things rather than against each other. You can get some good results.

Monica believed:

Male athletes think that it would be a failure if they decide

to stop and give themselves a break, mentally probably too. I think females are very aware of their limitations and I think they know when to stop and when it's time to get back into it. And if they're upset then they'll show it and males sometimes bottle it in, and I've bottled it in and I've had a lot of help from my teammates --- "how do you feel about this; are you upset; how are you dealing with this?". I think females express it more rather than bottling it up which is worse.

Sue adamantly opposed her coach's view that women were too emotional:

That wasn't my experience, that wasn't the way women are -- these women are tough, these women are smart, they're dedicated, they would compete in pain, with sprained ankles, cuts and bruises, it didn't matter. The only time I ever saw women cry was when they were extremely hurt or we lost an amazingly large game, those were the two times --- which men do. And the sulking, well, Christ, go to a men's game if you want to see sulky. There was an article on us once that was in the Herald that said women soccer players are tougher than men and in many ways I have to agree with it.

These were powerful, but somewhat rare, assessments.

Isolated comments suggested other images of femininity. Julie felt the difference between women and men athletes had nothing to do with "sensitivity" or the lack thereof, and rather was due to other distinctions in their essential characters:

Girls -- they listen better to begin with. And are easier to control in the sense that they have smaller egos and they know that they have something to learn and that a coach has a position.

From the women's persistent use of "girls" to describe women athletes, to comments such as the following, "Girls aren't supposed to swear", characterizations of femininity infantilized the women athlete. Furthermore, Ann, a track athlete, struggled with her part in knowingly sexualizing the female athlete:

I have a lot of respect for female athletes but I think we compromise too much when it comes to dealing with men. And I feel that girls go cutesy

and stuff like that and it's almost like you don't know what role to play when you're dealing with men.... With men, you're not sure how they see you and so you're trying constantly to fit into their mould.

She went on to say:

I find that women are really into looking sexy, and I'm not excluding myself either. But it's such a twist, you want to be strong and athletic but at the same time you want to be in a bikini practically, running up the track.

Again, these were powerful, but somewhat rare, assessments.

## **Coaches and their Coaching**

### ***Knowledge***

To coach is essentially to instruct, to teach, to know how to shape and direct an athlete's body. Indeed, the coach's knowledge was a significant factor in the athletes' assessment of a coach – the brevity of “he knows his stuff” was heard several times and spoke volumes in terms of a coach's worth. How this knowledge materialized in the athletes also affected how the coach was judged. As Colleen believed, a coach's value depended upon what he was able to produce:

[Her coach] has turned a bunch of girls who could not run properly, they didn't have any endurance, they had no skills, and he's turned them into bona fide track athletes. And very few coaches can do that... [her coach has] been able to look at mediocre talents and turn them into something exceptional... he's very much worthy of the position he holds and the esteem that his athletes hold him in.

Similarly, for a select number of women, the fact that a coach had a successful past with other athletes justified their faith in his qualifications as coach. This was evidenced by Traci, a current varsity athlete who asserted that her coach “knows what he's doing --- I

mean look at how many athletes he's taken to nationals and to the Olympics and they excel ... I trust him with that." Athletes joined and returned to clubs, at least in part, based on a coach's history.

Many women discussed the direct benefits they received as a result of their coach's command of technique, claiming that he "was a real fitness guru ... and that's why we were the fittest team every year", "taught me everything I know about my feet", "was very good with technique, so I've had less injuries", and for Lynn, under his guidance "I went from a local runner to an international runner". When drawing upon the coaches' grasp of the science of the sport, the athletes repeatedly labelled these men as "good", "great", "incredible", and even "excellent" coaches.

Knowing the fundamentals of the sport was instrumental to the coaches' credibility and for some athletes, knowledge was best accrued from immediate experience. A valued coach was one who had learned it first hand, as opposed to one who gained it through the teachings of a manual. This view was expressed by Maureen, an athlete in the beginning of her varsity career who argued:

I think the coach needs to know how to play soccer, I think it's a huge thing. If they are going to say this is how you're going to do it, then I think they should be able to *show* you how to do it. That may be a lot to ask, but if you're asking us to do it, you should be able to it. It shouldn't be 'do as I say, not as I do'.

Likewise, Ellen, a continuing swimmer, also appreciated the value of a coach's sporting past, arguing that it was important that her coach was a swimmer because of "that technical knowledge that you get."

I think that's really important because then they can compare and tell stories about themselves and how they did it. It gives you more

perspective.... they know what it feels like.

Different opinions came from two retired track athletes who questioned how important a coach's own athletic status really was. Kate noted that "not all good athletes make good coaches; and not all good coaches were athletes at all." Lynn praised her coach highly, even though "he wasn't athletic himself which was interesting, he was never a runner – he didn't need to be I guess." Overall, the assessments of the coach's merit was at least in part rooted in his knowledge. What the athletes sought was a coach who "knows his stuff".

Such positive assessments, however, were often countered with criticisms of the same coaches because their knowledge was incomplete. Sue believed her former coach "knew the x's and o's really well", but she also found that "the skills and so forth he wasn't as strong on ... and there were a lot drills where you were just standing around, not doing a lot." Julie commented: "Tactically, [he] was a perfect coach, he knows exactly the system to play and the positions everybody should be in", but "he was set in his system and teams figured it out and he should have adapted and he didn't." Similarly, current Dino Traci thought her coach was "amazing technically -- he can analyze you and tell you exactly what you're doing wrong and what you have to do on your next attempt." Her explanation continued: "[H]e couldn't teach you how to hurdle. He just says to do it... he doesn't actually break it down and tell you how". This view was held by several athletes who argued that good coaches were plagued by limits in their coaching knowledge.

Still more women, however, focused almost exclusively on the gaps in their coaches' knowledge. Maureen endured a career with two coaches who could only take her so far, who were not able to take her to another level; she felt her potential was stalled. Similarly, Kate looked back on a former coach and concluded:

The training wasn't very specific for me so it didn't really help... I got to a certain point and he wasn't helping me any more... right now we're figuring out that I just wasn't running properly... he never changed anything about my sprinting and that was my one downfall.

As well, several coaches were limited because of their lack of knowledge concerning women's bodies; they failed to understand how to coach an athlete back from injury or were obsessed with and misguided in enforcing fat percents that were at the "scary limit".

Karla remembered:

I would starve myself for weigh-ins and that's not right ... he really stressed the weigh-ins but he didn't stress how to eat properly... he really didn't communicate how we were to keep healthy lean bodies.

Indeed, some athletes seemed almost to expect such shortcomings with their coaches. Sandra, when asked what her image of an ideal coach entailed, replied: "Someone who can watch and pick out what the problems are and give solutions... I honestly can say I've never seen a coach that can do that or had one that has done that."

### ***Communication***

Perhaps knowledge was not the primary criterion against which an athlete assessed her coach. In fact, the women paid overwhelming attention to *how* a coach communicated (as opposed to *what* he communicated in terms of the biomechanics, strategy, and the "x's and o's"). Seemingly, the more substantial sources of contentment

and contention did not just involve coaches sharing what they knew; they also involved the coaches giving of themselves.

The women sought verbal contact, some kind of acknowledgment that the coaches were making an effort to assess what and how the athletes were doing. In terms of an ideal coach, the athletes wanted someone who “is always giving you constant feedback”, “can communicate exactly what they want”, and can say “you’re doing this wrong, can you do this?” Undoubtedly, the women appreciated any praise from their coaches, but communication was not about coddling egos or “blowing sunshine up my ass” in the words of Colleen. It was about constructive criticism and giving the women what they needed to learn. In discussing one of her past coaches, soccer athlete Nat commended this characteristic in her coach: “He just generated more respect ... because when the girls would come off he would take them aside and tell them why they came off”. The athletes expected and welcomed critical honesty whether they were doing well or badly. Jodi said she depended on her coach “to tell me the truth so I knew what was going on – he could tell me if I was having a bad game and I could deal with it.”

In sharp contrast were the criticisms made of coaches who apparently failed in communicating with the athletes. Some athletes found their coaches had little of value to say, and were ineffectual – it became “blah, blah, blah” according to Sandra. Gail, who was nearing the end of her career said: “It’s almost like a tape recorder, every meet this is what he was going to talk about. It kind of lost its excitement.” However, it was made obvious that saying nothing was one of the worst ways a coach could communicate.



Trina, who had decided to end her varsity career early, reflected the frustration of several of the women:

I need someone to say, "You did really good there" or maybe, "Do this next time", give you options. And he never did that – he never reaffirmed anything I was doing... you'd wait for him to tell you what you did wrong and nothing ... you'd always have that question in the back of your mind... he didn't tell you the positive, he didn't tell you the negative.

Colleen commented:

I've found it very difficult to train with [him] ... I want him to tell me what I'm doing wrong and exactly how to fix it. And he doesn't do that.... I'd rather he yelled at me ... there's been times when he's ignored me all practice. I've known I've done something wrong ... he doesn't even acknowledge me.

Without anything from the coach, the athletes seemed to feel they had no proof of his interest.

Coupled with the need to hear the coach, the athletes also believed there needed to be an channel for their own voice. Some athletes viewed positively the fact that they did not fear approaching their coach, that they could speak about their concerns. Nadine, a retired swimmer, spoke of a former coach: "I wasn't afraid to say 'I don't want to do this'. I could talk to him without him brushing me off. I had more control." Similarly, Lynn remembered a former coach who "allowed us to say how our bodies felt". This coach let his athletes have input into their programs. "If you were tired, that was fine... you could approach him on anything.... I had my say --- that was so important." A few women experienced an environment where both coach and athlete talked and listened.

For example, Jodi, a soccer player, recalled how a former coach “gave us the opportunity to recognize what was going on.”

He would say, “What do you think went wrong here?” .... There was always a venue for us to present what we saw as wrong ... information could go back and forth.

For many women this interplay was key to assessing their coach and the relationship.

Most of the women commented on experiencing this reciprocity to some degree with at least one coach.

Several women, however, encountered the opposite situation – the coach who stifled or resisted the voices of the athletes. Commenting on her present coach, Traci observed:

[H]is athlete doesn’t have a say in how they feel ... he says, “You don’t know how you feel ... you’re not good enough to know how you feel”. He’s harsh for sure.

Lynn reported:

If I told him I was sick, that I was hurting, it was all in my head -- “don’t give me that crap, I don’t want to hear about it.” .... It was like I had no input at all. He said, “This is what you’re doing, don’t even question it.”

Other athletes encountered less obstructive coaches, but nonetheless were discouraged by the coaches’ resistance to listening. Julie remembered her coach would “sit there and nod” when she said something but would never act on what she said. “I didn’t really say too much after a while. I guess I was waiting for him to just say or do something – that never happened.” Another retired athlete, Nadine, explained: “You could talk to him; he wouldn’t always listen – he would hear, but not listen”. As a result, athletes like Gail became detached from influencing their own athletic development:

He said once, "I'm an old dog, and you can't teach an old dog new tricks." I had brought up something that I had wanted to try and he just came out with "I don't think you can do it with me." I don't think I did it again.

The possibility of discussing "life issues" or family problems with their coach was seen to be quite unlikely for a few women; they just would not be comfortable in approaching him. For others, it was simply that they were afraid of their coach, intimidated because they were unsure of what he thought or because of his "stand-offishness". The coach's negativity and trivialization of the athletes' words created a hostile environment for the women. Not all experienced it, but the impact was unquestionable. Michelle stated simply: "Being able to talk to him – if you don't have that, then you don't really have a relationship."

On a related note, a small number of athletes detected that their coaches were trying to force an alternative kind of communication exchange. The obstacle for these women was a coach who seemed to manipulate their responses. For Gail, a swimmer, it got to the point where she said to her coach, "Look, I'm not doing this any more."

I think that's maybe when I did start getting some respect which is kind of weird because it was almost like he was pushing me to the point where I'd say, "I don't agree with what you're doing" and stand up for myself... but the way he goes about trying to get that communication is the wrong way.

### ***Support***

The athletes sought a connection with their coach; a relationship that offered a kind of stability that they could depend on. In effect, they sought support.

Communication was part of that support, it was a message of interest, and of caring, even

if it was directed only at the physical state of the athlete. Support, either spoken or implied through action, on the part of the coach seemed to demonstrate respect for and recognition of the athlete as well as a degree of belief in her. Much of it was the sense of the coach “being there” for the athlete. Sometimes it was simply the physical presence of the coach that touched the athlete as with Nicole who was pleased because “he’s there at your event” or with Alli who recalled:

The thing about [him] is that he’s totally dedicated to his athletes. He was always there -- I don’t ever remember him missing a day. He was more dedicated than any of us. If you wanted to train in the morning instead of the afternoon, he’d come out. He’d do anything for his athletes ... he just wanted his athletes to get everything they could.

Athletes recognized and appreciated the coaches’ desire to be involved. Continuing swimmer Tara was pleasantly surprised when her coach called her in the off-season and asked her how she had been swimming. For others, it was the coach being there on more of an emotional level, approaching the women as people rather than just athletes. Gail spoke of a past coach who encouraged her to end her career on a high note.

And that was good -- he had been on a national team and had to go through retirement and all those things -- he was able to prepare me. “It’s your last year, don’t do what I did and just fizzle out. You’re always going to have that in your mind.... pull the best out of yourself.”

Gail also found this kind of personalized support with one of her coaches whom she remembered as unselfish:

He was there for my every need and he got me through that Olympic year with all the things that I had wrong.... that was a hard time in my life. I had lost weight, I couldn’t race -- I was like “... I can’t do anything anymore”. He was really supportive, really trying to build my confidence back up and he dealt with a lot of emotional stuff.... he

is really good at listening, just letting you almost vent, without being judgmental which is good. I think some coaches too often try to solve the problem right away... He does just let you talk and get your stuff out when you have things to deal with.... he's really good at talking it out and calming you down.

The athletes also encountered coaches who had faith in them which was both inspiring and affirming. Of her coach, Nicole commented, "He was very supportive and told me that he thinks I have a lot more in me and that ... we can work it out. It's nice to hear." Some athletes found their coaches' belief in them to be unconditional and unwavering. Alli recalled, "He never lost confidence in my ability, even if I started to, he'd pull me out of it." And Ann noted her coach was "never disappointed, no matter what we did, even if we faulted out... he was finding a thousand good things that you did." The athletes took the coaches' assessments to heart, basing much of their self-worth on what they heard. A coach could make an athlete feel accepted, with a right to be in the sporting world. This was the case for Julie who remembered two coaches, one that "made us feel pride" and the other who "got to know us". Of the second coach, she said:

It was just natural for him. [He] would give the pre-game talk and you'd walk on that field like you were the best player in the world and you felt like you could do anything.

These women could depend on their coach for recognition. Whatever the level of success, these coaches would champion the efforts of their athletes, admitting their pride and giving due credit. Hearing a "well done" after practice was significant and as Sue explained, necessary: "'I'm proud of you.' ... a coach needs to do that. I think people need to hear it. It doesn't matter how good you are, you need it, you need to hear that

you did well.” Overall however, it was only a few women who had such experiences; many more did not feel supported by their coaches.

Several athletes did not feel at ease bringing family problems to a coach nor could they hope to be inspired by him – there was not that kind of dependability. There were physical absences as Kate recalled: “He just wasn’t there. He’d come out and leave a workout on a sheet of paper and leave.” And there were emotional absences. According to Michelle:

He doesn’t get involved in anything. If you have a problem he says, “Forget it, you’re here to train” and he really hates people that have any mental problems ... he’s like, “If you do bad, sure it’s your fault”... that’s the kind of attitude he has ... it’s very poor.

The coaches’ behavior also produced insecurities in the athletes. Gail heard her coach saying about some athletes, “I don’t know why they swim, they don’t have any talent.” She added: “And you hear him saying this about other swimmers and you wonder what’s he saying about me to other people.” A lack of faith on the part of coaches left athletes feeling betrayed. Gail remembered the time her team had a good chance to win nationals:

[W]e knew this right from September. The girls had got together and looked at what the other teams had and we were really working towards that as a team....[her coach] was reported as saying, “The guys will win and the girls will come in second at CI’s<sup>14</sup>.”... to actually have your head coach come out and say you’re not good enough for first ....So when he had so little faith in us I thought he was letting us down as a coach... I don’t think he realized what he did -- and I think that’s what burns me the most.

Coaches were sometimes not merely unsupportive but destructive, malicious, and demoralizing. Of one of her coaches, Monica observed: “He likes to make you cry. He

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<sup>14</sup> CI is short for CIAU (Canadian Interuniversity Athletics Union). CI’s are considered to be

would like to hurt you... bash you down so you can't work back up again, that's his philosophy ... it hurts everyone." Michelle recalled her coach saying her team was the worst he had ever taken to nationals. "It was the worst speech and I felt so awful after... I thought 'I suck.'" Traci spoke of her current coach:

A more positive coach may have made me feel better about myself. Sometimes I go to the track after I've had a bad day at school and I get zero from him -- you're just down. Especially at competition, there's total crap around him and because of the way he treats you, you're just run into the ground ... I wonder myself why I'm doing it sometimes because I don't feel good about myself, especially when I'm around him.

Perhaps the most explicit picture of a coach's negative impact was created by an athlete who felt "abused" by her former coach:

I was always going to be washed up, a "has-been" to him -- he said that.... He called me "lazy", told me to "get your fat butt going". I've never been more cut down and insulted in my whole life.... He'd come up and say, "This is what you're going to run and this is the time you're going to run" and then afterwards he'd say, "How could you be so stupid -- that was the stupidest thing that you could ever have done." ... nothing positive, not one thing.

But a lack of support on the part of the coaches also had a different effect for some athletes. So it seemed with Monica who claimed:

He's taught me a lot about having faith in yourself, like when he's not there, and he's almost never there coaching. I've had to go within myself to try to get strength to come to practice. When he's chewing me out, you don't want to come back. But you have to come back, you have to be disciplined with yourself.

This was also the case for current Dino athlete Trina who said:

Honestly there were days, there was a full year where I just stayed in track to get through it. Because I knew that it was going to get better. I'm staying in here to spite [him]. I'll not give him the satisfaction of

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university national championships.

seeing me quit.

### ***Making demands***

Linked to the desire to have a coach who believed in them, these women also sought a coach who would demand from them; to be demanding implied a kind of faith. A coach who demanded a lot essentially believed the athlete could do a lot. And when those pressures were not there, the women blamed the coach for not pushing their athletic capabilities. Sue looked back on part of her career with her coach: "He's a bit of a slacker himself so that's what you're going to get... we had to push ourselves because he wasn't going to .... I think it came back to haunt us." Nat said of her coach:

Being a gentleman so the girls will work harder isn't working that way. The girls are taking advantage of him and not working hard... he can tend to be sort of passive so I think it's sort of developing in them, a bit of passivity.... I don't think he's hard enough on us at times ....he doesn't have a mean streak ... He doesn't penalize the girls when they should be.

Leniency on the part of the coach seemed to restrict the athletes from reaching their potentials. Alli, a track athlete, spoke of her frustration in this regard:

At the end of my career, I'd run a race and I'd know it was shitty and I knew he thought it was shitty and what made it worse is he'd come up and he'd say, "Oh, that wasn't a bad race." ... he was so complacent about this race that I ran .... in a way that kind of told me that maybe he didn't care as much.

When a coach failed to set goals high enough, the athlete felt her ability was being underestimated; this in turn threatened her faith in herself. This was true for Gail, a former national team member who discovered her last coach's expectations were too low.

I think he's too much, "Well, try hard, as long as you try your best"



which is good to a point but he doesn't push you, even to believe that you can do that.

Those coaches who did demand more transformed obstacles into possibilities for the athletes. Current Dino athlete Jessica was grateful for her coach's pressure:

In coaching he demands a lot... he's really good about trying to help you not have low expectations ... I'd ask, "Are we almost done?" and he'd say there was only 400 metres left and then way past that I'd say "liar" ... if it wasn't for [him] probing me and getting me to go back, I wouldn't have got identified [by the national team].

To demand from the athlete was to get from the athlete. The women wanted coaches who were willing to push their athletes when they were tired, made practices very intense, would "run their butts off", and even on occasion, yell. This was not to assume that the women's potential was boundless, but rather to point out that a good coach was one that knew and could stretch the very limits of that potential. Former national team member Karla found she could be "stretched" with her coach:

He could push you so far, as far as he could, until you couldn't take another step. He was very good at knowing what you could make and what you couldn't make and then challenging you maybe six months down the road and push you again. He would push you to the end.

She added:

Coaches didn't want to hear you had your period and were bloated and cranky. And that made us tough, you could never have any excuses .... The coaches I had made me tough and angry and tired. I think any good coach would do that.

Being demanding was not based on force but on knowing how to exploit the athlete's will; on having "a balance between pushing and getting the athletes to push themselves."

On the other hand, some coaches were too demanding which worked against the development of the athlete. As Clare said of her coach, “He’ll either make or break you – once you’re broken, your life’s going to be affected, not just your sport.” A coach who pushed too far would undermine the women’s confidence. Former national team member Gail told of how her coach would put swimmers training for the same event side by side in the pool:

*He knew that it would put pressure on us... he’d always race us.... it could be pretty hard on your self-esteem.*

Jodi, in speaking of her last coach, explained, “He was (and this is bad) always thinking I should be in better shape and that was something at the end that started to get to me. I never felt adequate in that respect and I think I lost a bit of self confidence.” Traci also found her emotional state affected by her coach. She claimed, “He’s brutal with weight. He’s always saying [to me] ‘you should step on the scale’. It’s just getting me down, down, down, lower and lower.” As well, according to her coach, Lynn “could never run fast enough, I just couldn’t seem to do anything right”. She resigned herself to the “unattainable goals he set for us –you couldn’t reach them and then you were a loser.”

Overall, it seemed to be the body that was most threatened by the extreme demands of the coaches. Looking back on her career, Julie believed that she sacrificed her health for her coach.

*I know now that I was over-trained and I was burning out and I didn’t know what was going on and nobody noticed that. I was downwardly depleting, all my energy ... my health and happiness. You think there’s no way out.*

Another athlete, knowing her coach would not allow her to swim unless she reached a target weight, starved herself before weigh-ins. This same coach would “push cortisone shots and everything, I mean everything to get you back into the water as fast as he could .... you would just train through it.” Other coaches required unrealistic body fat percentages which some women claimed to have ignored, but not without witnessing the effect such standards had upon other athletes. Gail shared the story of her coach who, she believed, felt “we should be sticks pretty much”. Gail said the younger athletes thought they had to get their fat percent down and as a result, did not eat as much as they should have.

You could tell they weren't eating properly and the older girls, myself included, would overhear conversations that they weren't eating properly ... I think for some of the younger ones, the damage is already done.... they have it ingrained, that that number is so important... it's always a focus for them and that's not good.

As well, Ellen could see her teammates “going anorexic” because of the coach's insistence that they had to lower their fat percentage. Lynn found when she changed coaches that, “now it was working til I puked”:

Pathetic ... here, you weren't doing any good unless you could puke and crawl off the track -- ridiculous .. he made me compete when I was sick ... I had the flu so bad I couldn't get out of bed and he made me get up and run. I was puking and he's like, “It's all in your head... you're going to get up and you're going to damn well run.” Of course I ran like crap -- you shouldn't make a person do that.

When asked what she thought her coach believed an athlete had to do to her body to perform, she responded “abuse it, abuse it.” This story was repeated by other athletes: “he laughs when we puke because he likes that – loves that”; “we just had the worst work-out and everyone was throwing up and passing out and it was awful. And you can't

recover, you just stand up and back down you go.” Coaches were ignoring the responses of the athletes’ bodies and this continued with injury – coaches prompted athletes to dismiss their pain. Traci’s view was that “he expects that you’re not injured – you’re a wimp while you’re injured.”

You’re not strong enough if you’re injured ... so you always have to grin and bear it ... and you shouldn’t have to do that but with him everybody does.... Sometimes I don’t think he realizes how much pain we are in.

Sue recounted an incident where a player jumped for the ball and the goalie “rammed her” and she fell and ruptured her spleen. “I said that it was pretty dirty and the coach said, ‘She deserves it, she doesn’t go up with her elbows’ – this is his thinking. So he felt that it was due.” She believed another coach implicitly encouraged playing with injury:

One time I pulled my hamstring and I kept playing ... he had to pull me and he didn’t ... I think back to it now, it’s absolutely nuts... it was kind of unspoken, you just kind of suck it up and play through it and that’s what is expected at this level.

### ***Flexibility and fairness***

Beyond assessing the bio-mechanics and interpreting the body, coaches were expected to be able to read each individual athlete and understand them in order to personalize the coaching procedures and approaches. Several women spoke of wanting a coach with a yielding character, one who could accommodate a range of athletes. As Sue said:

He has to be able to recognize differences between individuals and cater to those differences; to exploit those differences and help with the creativity of that individual. To know when it’s time to say something and when it’s

not. To help them grow, not only in the knowledge of the game but as individuals.

And a few women found this flexibility, applauding their coaches for recognizing the strengths of each athlete and for acknowledging that an approach which worked for one athlete did not work for another. In contrast, discouraged by inflexible coaches with limited vision, several athletes commented that their coaches failed to get to know them as individuals, or that the coaches did not modify workouts, individualize training, or make changes. Questioning the reasoning behind her coach's strategy, Michelle remarked that her coach designed his workouts based on what one Olympian was doing.

He doesn't at all change it.... he has distance athletes doing strength training and short intervals -- they don't do anything long enough to build up endurance, so they just suck. I don't know what he's thinking.

Soccer, track and swimming athletes alike wanted a coach that could train the athlete, not simply the team.

In conjunction with this acceptance of differences, coaches were expected to treat the athletes the same. The sentiment, "an ideal coach has no favourites" which was shared by several athletes, was about fairness and the athletes wanting equitable (but not identical) treatment from coaches. Being fair was not about getting attention based on the performance, but about the coach giving an athlete attention regardless of her success. Showing such consistency across ability typified Nicole's coach:

He interacts with everyone, regardless of how good they are. So he'll talk to the best athlete and he'll talk to the athlete who doesn't perform so well. And he'll spend equal time with everyone... just to make them feel like they should be there.

Similarly, Tara's coach "treats everyone the same – if you're Curtis Myden or if you're me."

Conversely, there were the coaches who had their favourites. Many athletes resented coaches' emphasis on costs and benefits – putting effort into those athletes who could give some measurable return. Nicole constructed an image of one of her coaches who was "not the type of person to give you encouragement – unless you're one of his little star athletes".

I overheard [the coach] say, "What can I do, he's paid the money?"  
And so he picks out the people that he thinks can do really well and  
puts all his energy into them and it's almost like the other people are  
there just because they paid the money.

Even the athletes who may have been favoured in this way were quick to point out that it was problematic. Ann commented, "You could see the ones he concentrated on -- that was kind of hard for the ones who he isn't concentrating on – I could look over and see them hanging their heads. That's not right." Kirsten was troubled because her coach would change the training program according to what she asked. "But I know for others he won't do that. He does have favourites and I'm probably one of them. And that's tough."

### ***Views about women and femininity***

Differential treatment of men and women by coaches was detected by some of the athletes and came to mean the coaches considered men's and women's athleticism to be different. The focus on and enforcement of fat and weight restrictions seemed to be directed only at the women. Track athlete Ann felt there was more emphasis from

coaches on the women staying light. "When the guys get bulky you don't hear a whole lot about it, but when a girl starts putting on weight ... a lot is said and it's embarrassing for women because I think they beat themselves up enough about it." Nadine, a swimmer, agreed:

He had crazy ideas that drove me insane... just the girls would have to go running after workout because in his words, "they were all fat".... he made little comments, "You're being lazy. You're getting fat." It was never like that for the guys, which drove me insane -- because there were some fat guys compared to the girls -- they didn't have to run.

The behavior and comments of certain coaches was seen as "unprofessional" and involved sexualizing women. Ann observed:

The ego is really there. A lot of the time it's proving their manhood ... [he] likes to talk about the women that he would prefer to be holding hands with instead of us .... [H]e says, "I'm not here to hold your hand, there's another more attractive woman I'd love to...", almost like he has to prove he's still in the game, "I've got women after me".... showing his machismo.

One athlete was upset with the response her coach gave when she told him of her education plans. He said "Oh, you don't want to be a doctor, you'll just be a nurse."

There was also the coach who made it difficult "to instill anything because he was always out at the strip bars." Monica expressed reservations about her coach: "He stares at girls ... he's flirty and touchy-feely when he's dancing with you. I don't like to dance with him... that's a side I'm a little skeptical of.... he does look at girls in a different way." Michelle was adamant that "he's always loaded and he's all over the girls ... I would charge him". Kate was turned off by her coach whom she called a "womanizer" who

“went after” women on other teams. And perhaps the most disturbing story was told as follows:

We were coming back on the plane, it was my second year with him, and I was sitting next to him on the plane --- I was awakened by him fondling me, I kid you not, and I just kept my eyes close and was thinking, “This cannot be happening -- he cannot be doing this”. His hands were all over, he was rubbing my legs and my stomach. I thought, “This can’t be happening to me”. So I just got up really quickly and went to the bathroom and then sat down in another seat. I guess I just never thought that he would take advantage of me while I was sleeping. I trusted him ... I never thought he’d do that. That blew anything that ever happened between us and anything he ever said to me after that. I can’t believe he stepped over this boundary .... I was shattered.

As did some of the women, some coaches labelled women athletes as sensitive or emotional. Monica felt her coach “does have the idea that girls are a little bit weaker and ‘don’t push too much because you’ll make them cry.’” Other athletes, like Clare, explicitly heard their coaches say, “women aren’t as tough as men.” And while some of the women did not seem opposed to such assessments, others believed the coaches’ assumptions regarding women as athletes were often misguided. Ann asserted: “In [his] mind he’s saying ‘women aren’t there, they’re not equivalent to men ... I can manipulate them and make them perform for me but they just don’t have it all up there’ and that is an insult to me.” Similar objections were brought forward by two women who encountered coaches determined to characterize women athletes as inferior. According to Trina, a third-year veteran:

You see it when you get a new coach comes in. They approach a women’s team like “Oh, it’s ok” – they’re really sympathetic and they don’t want to say anything that’s going to hurt your feelings .... When they go to the guys, they have high expectations. “If you guys can’t perform up to this standard, you’re not going to make it, you can’t cut it”. But for the



girls they don't have very high expectations – they come in with “It's ok, you're just a girl” and you're like, “Stop it, I can do this”.

Sue, a retired athlete, described this scenario:

He would say, “I know women, I know athletic women, when you coach them they're going to cry, they're going to sulk, they're wimps, you have to deal with their emotional side” .... He had this archaic view of coaching women and I really think --- it was lost on me everyday – I thought to myself, how can he still believe when he experiences something totally different.... [a reporter] said that[her coach] said, “You know, it doesn't matter how much you plan or it doesn't matter how much you train them, and it doesn't matter how much you've worked with them and tried to get them ready for the game, and then they're ready and they're set and they're psyched, and everything is a go and then one steals the other's hair barrette and all hell breaks loose.” And [he] had apparently said this.... That can't be more wrong. And just to think that the coach felt this way, about coaching women, makes me realize that maybe it could have been better, things could have improved, maybe a difference would have been shown if this wasn't the underlying thinking that he had every day he came to practice. You have to wonder.

For the most part however, there was no clear indication that these women ever verbalized their resistance to such judgments by the coaches.

More favourable impressions given by the coaches came with time, with the athletes proving themselves. Jacqueline maintained: “He came in with low expectations to start with and then when he saw what we could do, what we could accomplish, he was quite caught up with that... he was quite surprised at what some girls can do.” Assessments of “different but equal” seemed to be a lot to ask for from most coaches and only a select number of athletes actually commented on a coach who did not make gender distinctions. Ann referred to her current coach: “What is impressive I think with him is that I don't think he differentiated with the female and the male athletes – he didn't treat

us differently, we did the same workouts, we used lighter weights and that was probably the only difference. And I liked that.” Traci believed: “He’s not biased towards women at all, I can’t say that against him. I’ve never seen him do that – like the idea that women are lesser athletes – definitely not.” Perhaps the fact that these women pointed out that their coaches held no gender biases indicated that such coaches were exceptions; that the women actually expected to be confronted by coaches who underestimated them.

### *Character*

Personal quality went a long way in diminishing any faults a coach may have had – good character was fundamental to the image of an ideal coach. However, the lack of that same character impaired the impact of several coaches. Beyond what the coach knew, said, and did, who he was, was critical<sup>15</sup>.

Aspiring to be like the coach and living by his example, came to be a guiding force in the lives of some of the athletes. To become coaches themselves, some athletes like Lynn believed they only had to look to their own coaches to find the best models of behavior:

Having him as a coach, it’s helped me out so much in my coaching. Everything that I’ve learned, is from him... with my athletes now, workouts can be flexible... I’ll ask them how things are going. I trust that the athlete’s not lazy --- so letting them have some input... being really personable but yet letting them know that we’re going to work hard. A lot of his traits.

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<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the coach as a man could not easily be separated from what he said and did. Coaches who sexualized women or seemed to relish inflicting physical punishment, were different *as men* from those who were responsive, played no favourites, and took women’s athleticism seriously. What follows are the assessments of personal character beyond those suggested in earlier sections of this chapter.

Others simply admired the way of life a coach adhered to as with Ann who commented:

He doesn't eat any fat food.... You look at the kind of athlete he was and still kind of is and athletes he competed against and then it kind of shows you what you need to do and not even necessarily to be an athlete but just a healthy person. He's 35 or 36 and looks like he's maybe 28 and I think that rubs off on all the people he works with too.

As well, it followed that the man they spent so much time with came to have an effect that went beyond the boundaries of "just the game". Indeed, about one quarter of the women believed that in their coach they had gained a friend, an important figure in their lives, and ultimately a relationship of a different quality than one based on coach as authority and athlete as student. Kim felt she had found in her coach her "best friend in the soccer realm" and one of her greatest friends overall – sentiments that were echoed by other women who explained that they knew their coaches well enough or that their relationship had grown close enough to call each of these men a friend. A degree of intimacy seemed to develop between coach and athlete. Kirsten commented, "He's a part of my life. He's a person that's there almost every single day... he sees me at every stage, good and bad." This intimacy was carried to another level by a small number of athletes who viewed their coaches as father-like. Michelle commented that following her father's death her coach became a father figure. Lynn explained,

At that period in my life I had a lot of problems with my dad, and so I really didn't have a dad, even though he was there. So [her coach] ended up being my father figure so when I left to come here it was like I was getting a divorce or if someone had died... it was so hard, it was like he was my dad, I know him better than my dad. I miss him so much.

And although none of these women stated that the added closeness was something they sought out, the overwhelming impression was that such a relationship was positive. Beyond their duty as “coach”, these men had encouraged the growth of athletes. And undoubtedly, part of this growth was linked to issues of trust – many athletes trusted their coaches “with everything” and even with coaching their children. As one former athlete explained,

I grew that attachment to him -- I know a lot of people end up marrying their coaches ... But I can see how that happens, you're just with them all the time. I totally [trust] him, I loved being with him.

If, as discussed earlier, athletes considered having “heart” as an important dimension of their own athleticism, they also admired it as a character trait in their coaches. Karla spoke of a former coach:

You never thought he didn't want to be there -- that's important. I knew that he would get as much out of me doing well as I would, you could see that. So I think a coach has to have the heart to give and let that reflect back from his athletes.... you could count on him to put in the little extras... he was --- tough love, a twist on altruism. He really did give all that he could.

A kind of vulnerability on the part of Gail's coach was also applauded:

[He] realized that Canadian swimming and coaches have one way to train and aren't willing to try new things and I think he really wants to be on the cutting edge, and he wants to learn new things and he's willing to do things differently .... At the beginning of the year he read a Dr. Seuss book about reaching your dreams ... It made you respect him because he wasn't willing to just do it the way he was taught, he was willing to try something new. So you were willing to try his ideas.

There were other coaches who also coached *for* the athletes, and their unselfishness allowed the athletes to grow. Women commented that “he liked so much working with

the girls and getting us to be better players”; “he wants me to do my best and have success – it’s not because he wants it, he wants what I want.”

In contrast to these men were the coaches of less admirable character: the one who thought it was funny to say to an athlete after knee surgery, ““Oh, we’ll just have to get you up and throw you down the stairs and then you won’t have a knee problem””; the one who was “sneaky”, who, whatever was required of him, “did the minimum”; or the one who, after discovering one of his athletes was sick with mononucleosis, commented, “That’s good because she’s got to lose some weight”. At a base level, several coaches were seen by the women to lack patience, to be overly stubborn, and to act immaturely. There were coaches who were self-absorbed and therefore dismissed the needs of the athletes. Gail felt that when her former coach became head coach the position went to his head and he started to take too much credit for the team’s performance.

He didn’t have the charisma... he tried too hard and he was trying in the wrong areas.... He wanted the respect and he didn’t deserve it...I find him to be very superficial and two-faced, and not to be trusted; there’s been too many things that he’s said and done.... I just don’t respect his words. ... If you add all of those things up, it’s like “you’re a fake”.

Coaches overlooked the interests of the athletes to the point of betrayal. Two retired Dinos discovered their coaches had knowingly kept information about the national team from them. Jane remembered:

My first couple of years I was just ‘oh, I’m not that great’ .... But he didn’t tell me that the national coach was wanting me to come out to the camps. I didn’t know that .... he tells me the next year, “they were really disappointed that you didn’t apply last year.” ... I was like “oh, ok, there goes my chance.”

Manipulation also came to light with the coach who was not honest and kept another athlete “hanging around”. Jacqueline commented:

She always thought that she would make the team, but she never got to travel with us, he just kept her hanging on. He’d have her working all the bingos ... she wouldn’t get any benefits from it. But every year he would make her think “you have a chance this year” and he did that to a lot of players.

And in the same vein, Ashley struggled with a coach who distorted the truth:

He likes to play mind games.... he said, “You made the team” and then he said, “You didn’t make the team – you’re on reserve.” Even at first when he said I didn’t make the team I was cool and then he said I did and I was like “oh!” and then the next day it was maybe. He’s like “it depends on how you run at this race” and then it was the next race. I think he thinks it’s going to make you run harder -- it was just frustrating.

In denying accountability and not taking blame, a few coaches were harshly judged by athletes who felt a coach should “admit he’s wrong”. Coaches repeatedly demonstrated negligence as with the one who “left a team of 25 teenagers in Florida with no coach” or the varsity coach who “should be more professional”, who “got loaded” at a competition and drove the van home – “that’s so awful.”

## **Relating to the Coach**

### ***Authority***

The coach-athlete relationship is a form of partnership. However, it is a partnership of inequality in which the coach has the advantage. It is he who chooses whether to work with an athlete, not the reverse. He holds the power of enforcement,

establishing how the athlete will train, the position the athlete will hold on the team (ie. a defender on the soccer team, a relay runner in track or a sprinter in swimming), and ultimately whether the athlete will compete. As an elite coach, he has at some point proven to someone that he knows what he is doing – that is an accepted badge he wears. There is a degree of authority and subsequently power that is inherent in the title of coach.

Most of the women expected and wanted coaches to act on their authority and “keep their distance”. Distance from a coach was a concern for some athletes who believed their athletic careers were best served by “someone who comes in and doesn’t know anybody”, by someone who is “not equal at any time”, and by someone who will not have a “a buddy-buddy relationship.” As Michelle put it, “I want to look up to my coach”. Jessica respected the coach who “is able to put his foot down”, who yells on purpose in order not to develop a “friendship level with the girls”, who is able to cut players without having friendship “get in the way”. A blurring of the line between coach and athlete often became a detriment to the athlete’s experience. Ann, a rookie, commented:

He’s getting comfortable with me so he’s not as patient and he’s a little -- not rude but if I say I’m hurting, he’d say something like “oh well” and it wasn’t like that before so I think maybe we’re getting a little too comfortable with each other so it’s not so much an athlete-coach relationship anymore.

A close relationship with a coach for Nat made her life more difficult – the coach went out of his way to be tough on her.

He was a jackass to me, was way harder on me and yelled at me more ... so the other girls didn’t think he was playing favorites.

Which of course wreaked havoc with our relationship and ultimately ended it.

Similarly, one fifth-year veteran had problems with a coach who had been a former teammate. "I just knew too much about him and I was expected to respect him as a coach – it was really awkward for me." In each case, intimacy acted to diffuse the coaches' authority. For many athletes, being a coach was about establishing certain standards that marked the differences between himself and the athlete.

Authority was about control, enforcing rules and discipline, garnering respect, and not "putting up with crap." Authority seemed to demand a delicate compromise between enforcement and flexibility. Pam recalled:

I had a coach that tried too much to be everyone's friend so no one did any work for him. But at the same time, coaches that try to be really strict and tough -- nobody likes them. But [he] seemed to be able to have people do what he said just based on because that's what he said. More of an authority, a legitimate authority. People listened to him and respected him.

Conversely, a few other athletes worked with a coach whose authority had dwindled because of his inability to take control and demonstrate leadership. Julie had approached her coach about another athlete on the team who was "bad-mouthing" him and causing problems with the team. "And he didn't do anything about it ...His authority wasn't really backed by much --- he didn't have the strength of personality to back up his knowledge." Jessica faced a coach with similar problems:

With some girls I think he felt a little intimidated, he didn't want to offend any of the older girls. There's one girl ... no matter what, he could never take her off even if she was having a bad game... if someone is not playing well, take them off, [he shouldn't] be afraid to tell people how he thinks they're playing ... [he] is too much of a nice guy ... I think they wish he'd put his foot down. I think a couple of



girls have manipulated him.

According to these athletes, their coaches simply did not have the character to embody authority.

For many athletes, the position of coach in and of itself was enough to dictate their judgment as well as their behavior – they were prepared to bow to his authority. Simply as coach, he warranted respect. Rookie soccer player Maureen maintained, “It’s just coach-athlete. I respect him totally and I would never cross that line with him”.

Former varsity athlete Heide explained:

He was there just to say his piece and we were just to follow suit, not to really question or get out of line and not think about what we were doing in any big picture.... I was pretty easy to mold.... I think it’s best just to let him coach.

Likewise, current track athlete Nicole felt, “If he does say something, you just do it, it’s not usually a comment – he’s telling you what to do, not why.” These statements repeatedly illustrated the resigning of control to the coach. And perhaps this was best captured with the simplicity of veteran Dino swimmer Janet’s statement that “you put yourself in the coach’s hands and you let him try to mold you.” What must be emphasized here is the fact that the authority and respect were bestowed upon these coaches *unconditionally*.

In other cases, athletes believed the coach should receive their unconditional respect even though they knew objectively that he did not necessarily deserve it. Regardless of circumstances, the athletes made – but reserved – judgments of their coaches. Track athlete Colleen commented:

At practice I find it very difficult to practice in pain...I’m miserable

and I'm grouchy and I want to tell [him] to fuck off, to shut up and leave me alone, I'm in pain.... He's like "Do you think you can do one more?" And if I can't do one more I'll bow and I'll do one more.... I think that [he] tries to get a rise out of me by shitting on me and ignoring me .... He really wants his athletes emotionally involved with their sport.... He wants you to tell him he's an asshole. If he's pissing you off he wants you to yell at him and he wants you to tell him. And I can't do that. If a coach tells you to do something, you just do it.

In that instance, it seemed neither pain nor mistreatment shook her belief in her coach's authority. Even faced with the assessments and actions of others that undermined the coaches' authority, athletes remained firm to their commitment to respect him. Such was the case for Trina in her last year:

I know other people on the team were friends with him and they'd go out drinking because he's relatively close to people in age. But for me I always like to keep the coach-player line, I don't like to cross that. It's something I grew up with. I never really socialize with him outside of soccer - I tried to distance myself from that ... they don't lose respect for him but they don't put him in an authoritative position anymore. He's my coach and I'll respect him for that and leave it at that.

This view was echoed by Fiona who contended that she respected her coach despite her own judgment that he lacked a back bone. Many athletes agreed with the standard held by Jane, a veteran athlete: "My rule is you don't talk back to the coach."

For some athletes, however, what appeared to be respect and the reification of the coach's position, was in fact a fear-based response: it was not the authority of the coach that invited acquiescence but the fear he created. For example, Kirsten said:

With the injury --- there were times that I knew it was bad and I didn't say anything because I didn't want him to think I was a wimp. That was something that I did that was kind of stupid on my part. But I was afraid of [him], so I continued on knowing that there was something wrong.

She was reacting to the man, not simply his position. There was also fear of what the coach's recourse might be if an athlete did resist his authority. Colleen claimed: "I do not get into it with him .... I was really trying to keep a good relationship with [him]. So I don't want to say something that I'm going to regret and be stuck in Calgary with no ... coach." As Monica maintained:

You never question what he says to you. Inside I am but I'm never going to express that to him -- "Hey, I don't agree with what you're saying" -- never. Everyone knows that, you never say anything to go against [him]. Or he'll basically say, "Bye, you can practice on your own, you don't need me. You can't handle it without me so you better just shut up and listen to me." ... No one really has the guts to tell him "I don't agree with what you said or did or you hurt my feelings". You suck it up.

Such resignation to authority stood in contrast to the several women who defied their coaches verbally; challenging their tactics, their coaching styles, and their opinions. Julie recalled one encounter with her former coach: "I got mad at him at one practice.... I was yelling at him and he was like, 'There's nothing I can do.' .... I wasn't afraid of him or anything ... I freaked on him." Other women did not react so intensely, but would quite clearly voice their resistance. In describing her current coaching relationship, Ellen commented:

I know he doesn't think I'm lean enough. But I told him, "I don't care what you think about that" -- it's bad for you to be less. He wants us to be 12 per cent body fat.... That's where you start screwing things up. So I always say, "No, I'm never going to be that low."

Resistance also took more indirect forms. It emerged as deception as in Jacqueline's story:

This one girl was totally hung over, just smashed, because we had gone

out the Saturday night, and then we had a game on Sunday. And [the coach] goes, "Oh, what's wrong with her?" And she wanted to play so she didn't want us to tell him what was wrong so we said, "Oh, one of those feminine problems", and he's just like every other man, just shies away from any issue like that. So sometimes you can be sneaky in that way.

The athletes could express a challenge to a coach without ever actually explicitly questioning or disagreeing with their coach – not by what they said, but by what they did. Few took such combative measures as Nat who expressed her objections by drop kicking a ball at her coach when he asked her to leave practice. Rather, the athletes more often took a subtle approach like Nadine who described the evasive tactics she employed to defy her coach:

Just the girls would have to go running after a workout because in [the coaches'] words, "they were all fat". And I thought, "No we weren't." .... I never ran, I walked.

Repeatedly the attempts on the part of the women to oppose the demands of their coaches did not go unanswered – the athlete's resistance was often met with the coaches' insistence. Take for example the experience of Gail:

Myself and another girl, we had been away at a training camp for three weeks, made a national team, trained for another two weeks, went to Japan for two weeks, and then we wanted to come home and have two weeks off between seasons. And [the coach] said that we had to come right back down to the season opener training camp. We fought about it with him for quite a few days and then finally went straight from Japan to the opener training camp -- it was the third in a row in a month and a half.

A similar story came from Maureen:

At first he wanted to make me a heptathlete and I fought him tooth and nail – I didn't want to do it. I ended up injured [training for the heptathlon] and I think that was a clear sign that my body just wasn't capable of that.

In both cases the athletes' opinions were effectively ignored. With coaches so unwilling to even acknowledge challenges, it may have been that the athletes chose the path of least resistance; that being acquiescence. It seems that the women could defy the *coach* but not his *position*.

### ***Men as coaches; women as coaches***

There were no questions in the interview aimed specifically at uncovering what the athletes' view of women coaches may have been – that information was volunteered. And what emerged was that a significant group of women would *prefer* to be coached by men rather than women. Some women regretted but would not change this preference.

As Traci noted:

I think it's awful to say but you sort of respect male coaches more... boys especially look up to male coaches. And it's horrible but I think women do too. And that makes it a lot harder for women to be coaches, to get the same recognition and respect as a male coach does. And that's horrible. But I think a lot of people would agree with me.

Others were quick to justify their preference. Nat commented:

Personally, I think you're never going to win with a female coach.... when you have a male coach, the drills tend to involve more physical contact and a higher work rate. Men just aren't as bitchy as women. And I honestly believe that a female coach would be more likely to carry a grudge, a personal grudge that would negatively affect a player's potential, more so than a male coach would.

Even the women who wanted to be coaches themselves had few reservations about promoting the male coach as the preferred coach. This was not due to the personality or quality of the coach, it was based on the coach's gender -- male was better. Such a

preference was illustrated by Jane, a retired Dino who continues to compete at the club level:

I'd much rather have a male coach --- it's almost ingrained in a person that the male is the coach --- female coaches just can't really get mad at you, I kind of expect that --- I just don't respect female coaches. I've had a couple and I just don't like having female coaches. I don't feel like I'm learning as much or that they can give as much --- I just don't like the idea of working with them. We had an assistant coach female coach and I couldn't handle it ---- I guess I just didn't respect her or what she said and --- I was --- didn't really take what she told me. I'd only really listen if the male coach told me something. She just didn't seem to be able to relate to us very well. I think that male coaches just gain more respect even though I want to be a coach.

The perceptions of the preceding three women were fundamentally different from Ellen's. She had a female coach whom she admitted hating because "she wasn't a good coach." As Ellen put it, "It wasn't the fact that she was female -- she just didn't know what she was doing."

That women coaches might face structural barriers in gaining acceptance was recognized in part by a very small number of athletes. Kim, a soccer athlete, noted:

Women don't have the opportunity to make a living in professional soccer and I guess that way men generally get exposed to it a lot more. I'm sure it's a benefit. But my experience has really been with male coaches and I guess I've gotten used to it --- you don't really know what else to expect.

Janet pointed out that women coaches "aren't taken too seriously" or respected as much "just because there's so few of them." Those responses offered, at least in part, an explanation for the substantial preference for men as coaches.

It was a rare suggestion that a woman as coach would be an advantage for the athletes. Sue felt:

You need women so you can come up and say “look, I’m on the rag, I’m hurting” and can understand and not freak about it or she’d say, “Oh you have cramps, there’s some Midol, go to it and get back out there.” We’ve all experienced it, we’ve been through it we know what it’s like, we know what their expectations are.

According to Nadine, a female coach might offer a greater attention to detail: “There’s too much emphasis on weight with a male coach. With a female coach you’d probably still have to weigh in but it probably wouldn’t be in front of everyone.”. And finally, Lynn put forward the idea that a female coach was a “safer” alternative:

Male coaches can just be male predators. It’s a love-hate relationship --- thinking, “He’s showing an interest in me”. It’s just like parenting or religion --- you’re born into that, what difference do you know. That’s the scary part – I lucked out and had a great coach. But a lot of time you feel it’s what you deserve, especially if you have an abusive father, and then an abusive coach, what’s the difference -- I just don’t think a female coach would do that.

### ***Reflections on relationships***

The findings presented to this point are a composite of reflections from all the athletes during different points in their careers with different coaches; a very detailed aggregate of what these women did and did not want and what they ultimately got and were denied in terms of coaches and coach-athlete relationships. But this aggregation does not show how actual, entire relationships unfolded. Comments on isolated aspects of their relationships with their coaches are, of necessity, extracted from their context. This is not to overlook the substance or the weight of the individual points that the women made; but it is clear that these points are part of larger stories, parts of a whole that often take on different meanings when seen as pieces of a lengthy relationship. One

of the most striking features of the stories is that there almost always seemed to be a trade-off of good and bad characterizations of the coach and the interactions with him. Indeed, this balance was apparently the norm. This is significant in and of itself. However, what is also significant is how this balance was understood and defined by the athletes -- seeing this variance in a coach and in a relationship comes to mean something different when, in response to a specific question<sup>16</sup>, the athlete judged such a relationship as positive, negative, or somewhere in between. The complexity of the relationships became obvious when the answer to that question was given a context.

In the case of the small number of “negative” relationships, such assessments were consistent with details that unfolded throughout the interviews; “negative” relationships did indeed look bad. Lynn’s coach, whom she accused of sexual assault and condemned for a punishing and derogatory coaching style, epitomized the “negative” relationship. For Lynn, the time spent with that coach was “like beating yourself up for two years.” Similarly, Julie, a retired athlete, had a relationship that lacked any positive reflections. She came to dislike a sport which had at one time been her life and she saw her coach as the cause of her change of heart. Hers was a coach of narrow vision, one who was stubbornly set in his ways of training and who was unable to put forth challenges. Varsity sport ended up not being what Julie had imagined; she left practices crying and frustrated because after she pointed out problems and made suggestions to the coach, nothing ever changed. She believed he singled her out, using her as a scapegoat for the failures of the team, and “he made me believe I was replaceable”. She did not fear

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<sup>16</sup> Question b6 in the interview guide asked whether the athletes would consider their relationship with their coach to be generally positive, negative, or somewhere in between.



the man but neither could she respect him. This was how Julie looked back upon the relationship; she believed he drove her away from sport.

For other women who characterized their relationships with coaches as negative, glimpses of more engaging qualities were still outweighed by what was missing with their coach. Heide, who commented that off the field she had a positive relationship with her coach as he was young and quite easy to talk to, went on to qualify this by saying overall the experience with her coach had been negative because of his fatalistic attitude and incessant complaints. Likewise, although Kate's coach initially showed patience with her, boosted her confidence, and really advanced her technique, she saw the relationship as negative -- she left on a "sour note", remembering that by the end he was not around as much as he needed to be, that he failed to support her teammate's right to attend a competition, and that he would try to "pick up" her friends on road trips. Michelle defined her relationship as negative but then went on to say, "Maybe when I get to know him a little better this year, it might change". She struggled to find anything positive amidst her conclusions that she was scared of him, that his presence was a demotivator, and that he created too much pressure on her. In each case, from strict contempt to a wavering dislike of the coach, these women felt that they had lost more than they gained from their relationship with a coach.

Slightly more relationships were described as "somewhere in between" positive and negative, and like those just discussed above, such evaluations made sense when taken in the context of the entire coach-athlete story. As Pam found, it was neither all good nor all bad -- her coach who struggled to communicate and lacked consistency was

“getting better ... he hasn’t hurt me in any way, but he certainly hasn’t done a lot to make anything better.” Similarly, Traci danced between moments of contentment and despair with her current coach. His unpredictable mood swings left her wary and feeling insecure but still hoping for that arm around her shoulder that he once gave to her in her first year. She knew by her second year that she worked harder because she was completely deprived of the attention she craved; attention that was reserved only for those who were successful at competition. She sometimes wondered if her career was suffering because of the coach, yet she was quick to point out that he had such an impressive history of successful athletes and an amazing arsenal of technical knowledge - the fact that he had this knowledge but could not really teach or explain was just something she had learned to deal with. Her athletic worth was continually undermined as he flatly denied that an athlete could know how she felt or that pain was as bad as she thought. His behaviour extremes of either being there for the athlete or not reinforced for Traci one simple rule: you never sought out recognition. In many ways, she felt he was not really a coach: “He’s just not there on any level of support, of helping in any way.” At the same time, Traci both trusted her coach with everything and hated him – that was her struggle. Clare faced a similar kind of personal turmoil with her coach, describing a love-hate relationship where “there was respect and there wasn’t respect”. She knew he refused to see that female athletes were equal to male counterparts, either mentally or just as people, yet Clare had to acknowledge that he was the best coach she had worked with and one of the best coaches in the world. He was the kind of coach that could “make or break you” and she herself was stubborn, the coach could either “take it or leave it”. Not

surprisingly, that combination culminated in numerous clashes, some ending with the coach simply telling her to go train on her own or with her teammates telling Clare that *he* was scared of her. With her shoulders “shot” and deep in debt, she looked back at her career and concluded none of the sacrifices were for a coach – it was about her and her sport and no matter how many times he had made her cry, that would never change.

Where the vast majority of relationships fell was on the side of positive and only one athlete failed to describe at least one of her relationships as such. There were relationships that were defined as positive and that remained consistent to that assessment throughout the interview. These relationships were almost ideal, their common thread being the unrestricted exchange that existed between coach and athlete -- he openly communicated and in return welcomed input from the athletes. Such foundations gave entre into relationships that became partnerships where there was mutual respect for what both the coach and athlete were contributing. However, several more of the relationships that were described as positive actually stood somewhere between ideal and entirely inadequate. This mediocrity spoke to the male coach as typically an imperfect coach that women were largely willing to accept. Despite her coach’s sexist opinions and extreme anal posturing, Sue commented that their relationship was “positive, yes absolutely ... we’ve had our troubles; I don’t dwell on it.” Similarly, Nat remembered what she had with her coach:

We had our ups and downs. I thought he was a jack-ass lots of times but when it mattered to me he was great. When I needed him to be a human being he was.... Yes, I would say the relationship was positive.

Even one current swimmer who found her coach to be “icky”, “odd”, and “strange” considered her relationship with him as “positive, it’s just that I don’t get along with him.” Colleen’s reflections of two coaches showed how notable differences could still be translated into two positive assessments of coach-athlete relationships. Her two coaches were almost the complete opposite of one another but she loved them both. With her first coach “shitting on her” and ignoring her, Colleen learned two valuable lessons: that she needed to be pissed off in order to be connected to her sport, and that she had to rely on herself to perform, far removed from the encouragement of a coach. However, it was this same behavior over five years that finally culminated in her need to take a break “or I was going to kill him, I was just going to snap”. Driven to a second coach, Colleen found a kind of security: she no longer faced the yo-yo sensation of the past which made her first coach unequalled in terms of knowledge but frighteningly uncommunicable and unapproachable. She liked her first coach but now knew her second coach *liked her*; she had respected her first coach but now knew her second coach *respected her*. Colleen’s second coach rebuilt her mentally, but he could not offer the same experience as her first coach. They were two different men – Colleen had no regrets in working with either.

For soccer athlete Jane, there was a much less defined difference between the “positive” relationships with two of her coaches. She seemed to treat both with equal indifference. With one coach, she felt he had had no influence on her performance: “I just played my game and he just happened to be coaching”. Similarly in reference to the other coach: “He let me just play mostly so that was good.” With little to see as exceptional in these coaches their failings became Jane’s focus: one put little effort into setting expectations

or into boosting confidence and waited a year to tell her the national team had been interested in her; the other had one positive comment in three years and was the least successful in getting the most out of the team. In terms of her career, each man was “just a coach, a stepping stone”. She went on to say: “I’d play no matter who the coach was. I’ll decide when not to play, the coach doesn’t.” If Jane was playing, that seemed to make the relationship positive and the coach “OK”.

Having this balance of good and bad in a coach-athlete relationship did indicate a pattern. From here, the issue arose as to why so many athletes came to see flawed (at least in part) relationships in positive terms. This skewed focus on the good suggested two possibilities: one, that the athletes, while blind to the ambiguities, suffered at the hands of the coach and simply left the relationship unquestioned; and/or that the women were maintaining an active role in managing both positive and negative aspects of the athlete-coach relationship. Perhaps it was that the athletes were somehow duped into accepting the negative dimensions of the relationship, or perhaps it was that the athletes were far from ignorant to the negative side and were indeed quite critical and open to it. In the latter sense, the athletes’ assessments of the relationships would have implied an awareness and ultimately an instrumental role on the part of the women in manipulating to their advantage whatever the coach may have had to offer. Sue spoke of the strategic approach she took in training with her coach:

He would tell us something and I would pick out things and take them and remember them and ignore the rest .... So you took what you could out of it and did what you could with it.

For one soccer athlete, Pam, “managing” sport participation should be straightforward:

I remember hearing a lot about the girls on the volleyball team at the university – they were quitting because of the coach. And I remember thinking – to me, if they really liked playing volleyball, it wouldn't matter. You could put up with it.

## Summary

The findings in this chapter have been organized around two main themes: the women's perceptions of themselves as athletes and their understanding of women's athleticism; and their perceptions of their relationships with the men who coached them. In the first area, material was presented on many dimensions of female athleticism and the sporting world as seen through the women's eyes. The women spoke of what kept them in sport – from performance to winning to the love of sport itself. They jointly constructed a view of the “ideal” woman athlete as a hard worker with heart. They described the intricate relationship between body and mind in athletic development and the need to “suck up” pain and injury. They spoke of the “athlete” identity (sometimes all-encompassing, sometimes only a part of “who I am”) and they candidly revealed their take on femininity in discussing how women as athletes are (or are not) like men, and are (or are not) worthy of the best coaching. Many of the observations presented in this section indicate a picture of women as athletes that is shifting and full of paradox.

In terms of the women's expectations of, and relationships with, their coaches, a similar range of judgments and experiences was evident. In general, they said they wanted coaches who were knowledgeable, good communicators, fair and flexible, supportive, and demanding of them (within legitimate limits). They hoped for “good men” who did not trivialize them as athletes or sexualize them as women. Overall, what

they wanted, as a package, was seldom what they got. Yet, as the preceding section of this chapter shows, how they assessed the relationships as a whole did not always correlate with the nature of the package. Similar inconsistencies are raised in this section of findings as are raised in the discussions of the women's perceptions of themselves as athletes. These inconsistencies are taken up in detail in the next, concluding chapter.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings presented in the last chapter were organized in two main areas: the women's interpretations of athleticism and themselves as athletes; and their perspectives on their relationships with the men who were their coaches. I want now to examine these findings as they relate to the theoretical discussion outlined in Chapter Three.

In that discussion, I described my perspective as linked to Connell's (1987) "theory of practice" approach. I understood the women athletes I interviewed to be competing in a domain traditionally dominated by an ideology of hegemonic masculinity in which, as women, they were likely to be at best second-class citizens. On the other hand, I have held that, though constrained by this masculine (sporting) world order, perhaps particularly in having to deal with coaches who were men, they were also agents. In this sense I saw them as interacting in a variety of local situations, where gender relations could play out in a variety of different and sometimes unexpected ways, where hegemonic masculinity might invite challenge and resistance, as well as acquiescence and accommodation.

### **Women's Voices on Athleticism**

In reviewing the women's discussions of athleticism and themselves as athletes, four distinct voices emerged which variously upheld or threatened the "masculine" order. In the first voice they spoke of themselves as "one of the guys", learning and playing the game in masculine terms. In the second voice, perfectly summed up in one track



athlete's description of herself as a "track chick", the women told of the experiences that fit the classic model of feminine-appropriate athleticism in which they were sexualized and trivialized. Tied to this was the third voice, one in which they described parts of their athletic careers in terms which suggested they saw themselves as "second-class athletes", marginalized as insignificant in the construction of meanings in athletics and undeserving of fulfilling sporting experiences. Finally, in the fourth voice, they spoke as "athletic women", pointing to the empowering capacity of sport, as well as the active role they played in shaping their own athleticism and sporting ideals. These voices did not speak for all the women nor for all of their experiences. Rather, they served as some of the more distinct interpretive frameworks which were engaged, relinquished, and exchanged as the athlete's understanding demanded.

What some of the women in the research explicitly demonstrated was that, in appropriating certain characterizations and behaviours, they thought of themselves as "one of the boys". So they accepted uncritically the traditional connection of athleticism with the disembodiment of pain and injury, aggression, and even violence – expressions that have been held as part of a select male preserve. The extent of the athletes' injuries not only suggested that these women were training and competing at a very intense level but also that they accepted interpretations of sport that have been seen as appropriate for men. However, these women clearly felt that how they participated in sport represented no accommodation of masculine standards. As Maureen simply explained, athletes *have* to sacrifice their bodies. Bodily sacrifice was not uncommon, nor was it suspect as excessive or gratuitous; for several of the athletes, playing through pain and injury was

consistent with what an “athlete” was expected to do. As “part of the game” pain and injury were normalized, promoted, and trivialized. This was how the women came to define the abuse of their bodies – in terms that have characterized men’s sporting participation.

These women also adhered to other “masculine” imperatives: the importance of winning and the honours bestowed. Success was a reward and it kept some of these women in the sporting arena; as “one of the guys”, focusing on the outcome was primary. This ethic of achievement was illustrated by the athletes who commented that they would walk away from their sport rather than continue training and competing only to face waning performances. They wanted to experience sport at its peak; nothing less. These women were athletes in the classic sense, adopting definitions with a hierarchical emphasis on being at the top.

This arrogation of sports’ traditional prescripts was not limited to the women acting as “one of the guys”; it also meant several of the women acted (perhaps more “appropriately”) as “one of the girls”, as “track chicks” who seemed to have adopted a version of athleticism *subordinate* to that of “the guys”. Ann, although critical of her part in “going cutesy” in the presence of male athletes and coaches, contributed to the sexualization of the women athletes. Part of her athletic character included acting sexy, trying to fit into the feminine roles expected by men. As “sport chicks”, women athletes were undermining their athletic presence, essentially infantilizing and discrediting themselves as full and true sporting bodies. They saw themselves (and consistently referred to themselves) as “girls”, substantially different (read weaker) in comparison to

the men in sport who set the athletic standards. “Girls will be girls” translated into inabilities; the inability to take criticism, to show mental toughness, and to take comments and the intensity of sport impersonally. Women, as athletes were too emotional. They were not men and that meant they were athletes of a diminished capacity. It seemed in large part that the women were accepting classic interpretations of sport that held that reactive and emotional responses in sport were incongruous with athleticism and naturally fit the fragile nature of women.

Not far removed from the “chicks” voice were the interpretations of “second-class athletes”. Some women were very tentative in making claims to their own athleticism, resigning themselves, as Nicole did, to men’s comfort in the sport arena and to the differences in physiology that meant women would not be as fast as the men on the team. Janet conceded that she would always “suck” compared to “guys”. These two women went on to offer an image of women’s strength that came from continuing to train, staying dedicated, and being proud, but this image wavered in the face of the assessment of women as “not being as important”. Nicole and Janet have come to judge female athletes by the same standards that ideologically constructed women as inferior in the first place. Several women bought into the systematic marginalization of their athleticism as well as into the elevation of men in sport as legitimate. They said it was “OK” for them to work with ineffective and problematic coaches. In fact, it would often be “OK” for their daughters to do the same. But it would not be acceptable for their sons to train with the same men. To respond that they wanted more for their sons than what their own coaches could offer clearly indicated that the women believed female athletes

deserved less and that sport should uphold masculine interests as primary. Ultimately, no disservice was done to athleticism if women worked with mediocre coaches. A few of them worked with coaches who, they said, would never command the respect of male athletes. But as women, they were to be uncritically loyal and manageable. It was not their place to make demands nor to define the athletic experience.

In sharp contrast was the voice of strong “athletic women” who did demand that their definitions of athleticism be recognized. These women refused to accept unrealistic body standards regarding fat percentages and idealized images; they stood against an ideology that distorts, commodifies, and sexualizes the woman athlete through practices of self-surveillance. As well, they constructed their athletic identity as inseparable from who they were; they were comfortable in the sport environment and actually felt “lost” outside of it. Sport provided for women like Sue their culture, their language, and their community. Other women pointed to the impact sport participation had on their lives more generally; fostering a growth in their confidence, providing an emotional release, and facilitating a balance in their lives. Being athletic was an exercise in empowerment for these women.

For many women, the most valuable part of what sport had to offer was far removed from displays of competition and accomplishment. Some of the most poignant examples were the stories detailing the love of the game that kept the women in the sport; the smell of cut grass, the feeling of being at home, and the sound of water, each contributed to an image of sport that had to do with an almost spiritual affinity that dissipated the strong association between sport and achievement. In the same vein, most

women, in discussing sports' attraction and benefits, pointed to the friendships they made, the social network and stability that they gained through sport participation. Such networks gave their sporting experiences more meaning than any award could.

Connections between women were successes in and of themselves. As Gail argued, women made great teams, parts of a whole that competed together as opposed to against one another. A sisterhood proved empowering. Sport was an arena that bred creation and construction, not alienation and divisions.

For the "athletic women", the physical was tied closely to the mental; what they could do was a measure of what they could think. The psychological obstacles and "victories" were often more critical and valued than any physical barriers or prowess. These athletes seemed driven by personal agendas such that sport was not about defeating an opposition but rather not letting yourself get beaten, proving a point to yourself. This seemed evident in the prescriptions of what a female athlete ought to be: having heart and developing a sound work ethic were critical for athletic development but were not about intimidating nor eliminating an opponent. The focus was on intensity as opposed to overt aggression. For many of the women, the practice of sport was an end in itself, not winning at all costs. Monica adhered to such thinking, claiming that women had an ability (separate from men) to know their limitations and not to see failure in having to stop or in having to express questions and frustrations. What they gained was the experience and not simply the victories; what they remembered was missed potential not the fleeting glory. That "it was never enough" is perhaps a "feminine" judgement, one which women have brought to the sport world. That success could indeed go beyond

masculine imperatives of measurable achievement and winning versus losing, may indicate a new and distinct direction in athleticism. These women were not unaware of success and its meaning, but it seems that the “athletic woman” was one who balanced achievements equally with the struggles.

The individual voices of the women moved between these four interpretive frameworks and sometimes beyond them. However, they were never limited to just one understanding of their sport world. Seeing themselves as “track chicks” did not mean they could not envision their part in the creation of the strong “athletic woman”. Indeed, the complexity of the woman athlete lay in the fact that she spoke in so many voices; that her experience and understanding was so diverse and varied.

### **Athletes and Coaches, Women and Men**

The second area discussed in the findings, the women’s perspectives on their relationships with their coaches, is similarly unresolved. Few coaches were definitively categorized as either ideal or entirely inadequate, and indeed the majority represented both welcomed and rejected traits. What then needs to be addressed is the athletes’ balancing of the good and bad in coaches and how it is that they came to accept such trade-offs as a part of their athletic development.

Coaches’ abuses of power were evident throughout the interviews. There were stories of coaches resisting and categorically denying athletes the opportunity to speak or trivializing what the athletes did say; deriving satisfaction and even pleasure out of making athletes puke and cry; withholding information about the national team’s interest

in players; manipulating athletes into believing that they had made a team. There were other stories of coaches who sexualized the athletes with comments and behavior; required athletes to compete within unhealthy weight limits and with pain, injury, and illness. All of these cases involved mistreatment and arguably a denial of athletes' rights. The most deliberate, unjustifiable, and extreme abuse of power was demonstrated in Lynn's story of sexual assault. To account for this abuse, it seems the structural imperatives that support the normalization of male control and female passivity can indeed provide some understanding. In all of these examples, the coach-athlete relationship seems to reflect a construction of men as aggressively and (hetero)sexually dominant and women as submissive victims. The coach had acted upon his sense of entitlement, and the fact that he was never approached or questioned by the athlete concerned spoke to the embeddedness of an ideology that maintains masculine superiority. Each woman faced an institution that often covers up and dismisses abuses by men while reinforcing the feminine image of athlete as inextricably linked with sexual attractiveness. In Lynn's case, she kept silent in a world that wanted it that way. The sport arena does not encourage a woman athlete to challenge or resist her male coach as it is his position and his gender, not hers, that is legitimized in athletics. Although the athlete who was sexually assaulted was so shocked by the abuse (indicating that she did not see it as "normal") the fact that she continued training with him and repeatedly wondered how he had so much control over her, lends support to this view of men in sport as untouchable.

Most of the women who struggled with a relationship that they deemed negative eventually left that level of competition, the coach moved on (which does not really indicate any action on the part of the athlete), or the athletes themselves found different coaches. What needs to be addressed then are why the mass of athletes continued with coaches and ultimately athletic careers that were often far from ideal. On the one hand it could be argued that these athletes were appropriated by the ideological force of hegemonic masculinity that constructs women as secondary athletes and subsequently undeserving of first-rate experiences. This argument seems to be supported by the women who dismissed or justified intimidation, limited knowledge, negativity and miscommunication, mistreatment, a lack of integrity, and neglect at the hands of the coach as acceptable. The most striking example of this support comes from the women who, like Colleen, detailed a coach's countless flaws and then summarized the relationship as positive. That the athletes abused their bodies in order to please a coach by starving themselves, by continuing to train despite knowing they were injured, and by pushing their bodies past self-defined limits, could indicate the extent to which they had been co-opted; the male coach reserved the right to control the female athlete's body, and the women, appropriately, acquiesced.

The belief in masculine superiority (and women as "second class") was also reflected by the athletes who contended that their athletic development would be best served by male coaches. Irrespective of the fact that these women wanted to coach and that most of them had never worked with a female coach, they held that men were inherently better coaches. Essentially, these athletes were arguing that a good coach was



defined in terms of gender. And in effect, such an argument once again reified the superiority of men in sport, and legitimated the inferiority of women in that same arena.

This explanation however, is not completely satisfactory. Not all coach-athlete relationships played out along these lines. Where the classic hierarchy of masculine authority and feminine submission did not present itself as expected was in the relationships of athlete and father-figure. In those instances, the potential was there for abuses of power in classically patriarchal terms. Arguably, as a father-figure these men could have manipulated the athletes' unconditional respect (the same respect they might hold for their fathers). But in the examples in this study, the coaches were not dominating patriarchs who demanded full submission to their authority. Nor were the athletes totally dependent upon these men. Rather the relationships were presented in very positive terms; the women found support, mutual respect, growth and opportunity, and avenues for their input and opinions with these coaches. So although attaching "father" to the relationship could potentially suggest inequality in terms of power, the relationships were actually empowering. Defining the coach as father-like and apparently worthy of an elevated position did not mean the women were surrendering their own voice or sacrificing their claims to athleticism. What the father-figure reference seemed to represent was a relationship marked by security as well as the appearance and maintenance of trust. Ultimately, these relationships were consistently positive (in that the athletes defined them as such and the interviews overall supported such assessments). What was evident in all of these stories was the athletes' perception of empowerment. It was not merely that these coaches were not destructive or harmful;

rather it was that the coaches actively encouraged and created an atmosphere for athletic and personal growth. They made a positive impact. These coaches were good at what they did and they made the women feel good in their interactions and in competing in their sport.

As for the rest of the women who were faced with less than ideal coaches and with relationships that wavered between good and bad, to present them as cultural dupes compelled to uphold feminized and subordinate roles in the sporting world would be far too deterministic. In their own stories, they were agents too. Arguably, staying with the coach was more about athletes getting what they wanted as opposed to merely being blind to gender disparities in sport. As Jane had commented, a coach was merely *just* a coach, a “stepping stone” in an athletic career. Female athletes were willing to accept a trade-off between a mediocre coach and relationship, and, simply, the chance to compete. That it was the athlete’s decision to compete and that a coach could never make her quit, and that loving the sport was reason enough to “put up with” a coach, all made the coach incidental to the athlete’s experience. In this sense, the coach was a means to an end, not an end in himself; competing was the fundamental goal for these women. And for the women who stayed in sport because of the friendships and the tangible rewards of good health, money, and travel, the coaches’ control was outside of what really mattered to them. This was not to say the coach could be completely overlooked; he did influence how the athlete’s training and career unfolded, but he may have just been an obstacle to overcome. In relationships that were frustrating and marked by negativity, the athlete who stuck with it was empowering herself by overcoming adversity; not quitting was a

personal victory for many women. Colleen stayed to spite her coach and to deny him the pleasure of driving her away. The “athletic women” were both proving they could make it in sports and claiming that they had a right to be there and to define their own sport world. These were subtle but powerful threats to the coaches’ role as gate-keepers to the women’s experiences. So, even though the women might have been considered secondary athletes when compared to men, athletes like Nicole and Janet believed they made a statement by continuing to train -- “toughing it out” meant women could stand their ground as athletes. Coping with what the sports world dealt them was about taking their athleticism in their own hands. And for some, coping meant outwardly challenging the coach, questioning him or even disobeying him. For others, it was more of a strategic approach: taking what was of value from what the coach had to offer and ignoring the rest; letting the coach yell and then going on to play her game. Feigning compliance simply allowed the women to compete, largely unencumbered by the coach. So with most of the relationships being clearly flawed, the fact that the athletes could see these relationships in a positive light may simply have been the result of one thing: in the end, they were able to compete. None of this is to deny the impact of sport’s connection to the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, it helps us to understand how women athletes manage and construct their athletic world.

One question then remaining is whether the relationships that were played out could be defined entirely in terms of gender. Indeed, it is hard to argue that men’s triumphs and struggles in sport and with their coaches could be completely different from those of women athletes. Though women are far more likely to be victims of sexual

assault or harassment than men, some men have also suffered at the hands of their coaches. The story of former NHL hockey player Sheldon Kennedy is evidence of that. What becomes clear is that sport protects the coach as the instrument in developing great athleticism and ultimately ensuring success. The message in sport is that the athlete should uphold unconditional respect for the position of coach and as such, “putting up with” a coach is more of a function of the title than of the coach’s gender. Male athletes too have risked their bodies and been caught up in the principle of “sucking it up” at the behest of coaches. That a coach can demand submission may therefore point more to the power discrepancy between a coach and an athlete, not a man and a woman. Where the question of gender re-enters the discussion is the possibility that male athletes’ voices (as the validated voice in sport) would encounter less resistance than those of women. Indeed, men may face the authority inherent in a coach’s position, but their challenges to that authority may not meet with the same resistance as the women in the study found. Therefore, they may not need to “manage” their relationships in the same way as women.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, for the woman athlete who is constructed as limited within sport because of her gender, it follows that the sports political system as well as the development and assessment of her skill are likely to be accessed largely through a male coach. My intention in addressing the ideological foundations that support such divisions between men and women in sport is not to deny agency to the woman athlete by implying a determinism in sport, or by presenting the coach-athlete relationship as a zero-sum power

struggle. Indeed, as an agent and a social creature, the woman athlete is framed as a “manager” of her athletic career, defined by the masculine sport world and empowered by the control she has taken of her own sporting body.

This is not the final word on female athleticism; my research aims have been exploratory and I make no claims beyond that. This study certainly had its limitations. My work has been conducted with 32 varsity athletes from Western Canadian universities, competing in three different sports, and training with 22 different male coaches. This is a small sample, drawn from a local sporting scene. Many of the women worked with the same coaches, many knew each other as teammates, and the context of many of the stories was the same. However, the goal was not to generalize findings, but rather to illuminate some theoretical concerns. I have been able to point to discoveries, bring to light patterns, and move the voices of women in sport to the forefront. These were primary goals for my research. Women in sport have been excluded, dismissed, and spoken for – it has been my intention to let some of them be included, engaged, and heard. Specifically, this research has explored the agency of women athletes, truly as players in the game.

What the women had to say on the one hand defined what it meant to be a “sportswoman”, both athletic and female; on the other, what relationships with male coaches had come to mean. In both spheres, the struggle ensued between structural constraints and the power of the women as agents. That the women would adhere to a sport ethic of achievement, dominance, and sacrifice as “one of the boys”, draw an image of the “track chick” in sport as inherently fragile and too emotional, resign themselves as

“second-class athletes” to the naturalness and legitimacy of men in sport, yet define themselves as “athletic women” entirely comfortable as strong and active members of the sport world points to the tension between the power of masculine hegemony in sport and the strength of the women to create alternatives. Similarly, that the women would accept neglect and mistreatment at the hands of the coach, demand that the best coaches are men, yet demonstrated their ability to manage their relationships to their own ends, using compliance with a coach as a way to get what they ultimately wanted (read a chance to compete), again shows the battle between what sport socially imposes and what the women construct.

This exploratory, interpretive study has given voice to a *few* women,. But this is an important contribution given that women’s voices have been largely dismissed as a meaningful force in the evolution of sport and its meanings. This research also invites further investigation as I have certainly created more questions than answers. An obvious and significant extension of this work would be to explore how men in sport construe their athleticism. Does it in fact hold true to or perhaps challenge the ideals of the aggressive, elitist, risk-taking, dominating, and heterosexual male athlete? Another elaboration of this work would be to study athletes, both men and women, working with women coaches. With men reigning supreme in the athletic arena, their interactions with women coaches who, although in positions of authority would be defined in part by their “subordinate” gender, could provide an interesting contrast to the present research. Indeed, it may be that men can impose their definitions with much less resistance and with little strategic finesse – what they get may be much closer to what they want. In

terms of women coaching, the athletes in this research showed definite opposition to such a coach-athlete relationship. However, as it has been noted, few of the women had any experience at all in training with women coaches and as such, it may be that women who have a coaching relationship with another woman would make entirely different assessments. It seems likely (as such a negligible number of male athletes are coached by women) that men would frame responses to women as coaches in much the same manner as the athletes did in this study: why would women be respected as critics, judging and monitoring the athletes, in a world that holds women really do not belong even as students. Again, in addressing such questions, I believe the focus has to stay with the athletes' meanings, their assessments and understandings of their sporting realities.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Guide**

#### ***a. Dino Athletic Career***

1. Age
2. Sport played at the U of C (track and field/ soccer/swimming)
3. Number of years as a Dino (track and field/ soccer/swimming) athlete
4. How many coaches did you have (have you had) at the U of C?
  - [if two, discuss both separately; if more than two, ask: Which two coaches were the most significant or memorable, for whatever reason?]
  - What other coaches have you worked with outside of the U of C (club team, other university, high school)? [ask to discuss the most significant].
5. How well did your team perform with the coach?
  - you personally?
  - [how are you judging the performance -- in terms of expectations, outcomes, comparison to other coaches?]

#### ***b. Issues of Power and Control***

1. Tell me about the coach's coaching style
  - during training
  - during competition
2. What was the coach like outside of sport?
3. How did you act around your coach during training?
  - during competition
  - outside of sport (ie. relaxed, reserved, nervous)
4. What did/do you depend on your coach for?
5. What part of your development did/do you entrust to your coach?
6. Would you consider your relationship with the coach to be generally positive, generally negative, or somewhere in between? -- how so?
7. Would your athletic career have looked differently if you hadn't worked with this coach?
  - Would your life have looked differently if you hadn't worked with this coach?

#### ***c. Issues of Gender and Sexuality***

1. I am interested in the physical aspects of the sport. What do you have to do to your body to perform well as a female (track and field/ soccer/swimming) athlete?
  - What about nutrition and diet, pain and injury?
2. What do you think your coach's ideal physical image is of a female (track and field/ soccer/swimming) athlete?
  - How did you measure up to this physical image?
3. What other things do **you** think go into being a good female (track and field/soccer/swimming) athlete?
4. What other things do you think the coach feels are important in being a good female (track and field/ soccer/swimming) athlete?
  - How did you measure up to these expectations?

5. What expectations do you think your coach has for his players as competitors? -- as students?  
-- How did you measure up to these expectations?
6. How did your coach want players, in general to look? -- to act?
7. What would your image be of an ideal coach?
8. How did your coach measure up to this ideal?  
-- during training  
-- during competition  
-- outside sport
9. How do you think other players felt about the coach?
10. If you had a daughter, how would you feel about her playing for your coach? -- why?
11. If you had a son, how would you feel about him playing for your coach? -- why?

*general:*

12. What has kept you in track and field/soccer/swimming?
13. Have you ever thought of quitting -- why?
14. Over the years did your coaches ever play a role in whether or not you continued to compete?
15. What sacrifices have you made for your sport?  
-- What sacrifices have you made for your coaches?
16. Overall, what was the experience like working with male coaches?
17. What should a male coach offer to a female track and field/soccer/swimming athlete?
18. What have male coaches offered to you as a female track and field/ soccer/swimming athlete?
19. Thinking back over these experiences with the coach, is there anything we have missed or that you would like to talk about?

## **Appendix B**

### **The Male Coach: Understanding the Experiences of Female Athletes**

**Vivian Krauchek**

Department of Sociology, University of Calgary

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Please take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This research, as part of the requirements for my Masters degree in Sociology, is intended to explore the experiences, both positive and negative, of female athletes with male coaches. I am interested in what participation in sport and the coach-athlete relationship mean to them.

You are one of approximately 30 female athletes I hope to interview. I am choosing soccer, track and field, and swimming athletes who have competed at the University of Calgary during the 1990s. The interview I will conduct with you will be audio-taped and will take about one hour. Throughout the interview feel free to bring up any issues or concerns that you may have. Please note that your initial agreement to be interviewed does not obligate you in any way – you may refuse to answer any questions and may terminate the interview at any time. In addition, it is possible that I will contact you again with brief follow-up questions.

Every effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. I will share the information you provide only with my supervisors, Dr. Gillian Ranson and Dr. Robert Stebbins. You may know other athletes whom I will be approaching, but please do not discuss the interview with them. Your name will be removed from the interview transcripts and nowhere in my thesis or other published research will there be references to your name, team players' names, coaches' names, or the year(s) you played at the U of C. The data from the interview and any subsequent contacts will be used strictly for research purposes. You should know, however, that even these precautions cannot guarantee your anonymity since any member of the university community can have access to the thesis – they may be able to recognize some of the data or situations and identify you as a participant.

Although the questions I ask will not be focused solely on the negative, there is the potential for the interview to elicit sensitive and unpleasant memories as well as details of inappropriate behavior on the part of coaches and athletes. If you experience any distress during or after the interview, please tell me or contact me later. I will be able to refer you to an appropriate support service.

There is no remuneration for your participation, but your time and input are greatly appreciated. If you are interested in the findings, I will contact you upon the completion of my thesis.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Vivian Krauchek  
220-6501

Dr. Gillian Ranson  
220-6511 (work)

Dr. Robert Stebbins  
220-5827 (work)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

**COUNSELLING RESOURCES**

University of Calgary Counselling Services	
Dr. Sharon Crozier	220-4079
Shirley Voyna-Wilson	220-4086
(Sexual Harassment Advisor)	
Calgary Communities Against Sexual Assault	237-5888
Calgary Family Service Bureau	233-2370
YWCA Support Centre	266-4111
crisis line	266-0707