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WOMEN ON THE MOVE: WOMEN, SPORT  
AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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# WOMEN ON THE MOVE: WOMEN, SPORT & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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This publication brings together papers that were presented at the *Women on the Move* conference, hosted by the Women's Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Nepean, on Saturday, 17 November, 1990.

The event raised discussion around the issues of women in sport and physical activity, and attracted over 70 people, the majority from the local community. The event included a seminar, which was the forum for the papers collected here, and opportunities for women to participate in a range of physical activities including Tai Chi, aerobics and jogging.

The day was launched by Dr. Marlene Goldsmith MLC, who argued that the lack of media coverage of women's sport sends a "corrosively destructive message to women's self-esteem and self confidence."

Libby Darlison, sports sociologist and former member of the Women's Sport Promotion Unit, pointed out that regular physical activity can significantly improve quality of life, but warned that girls tend to lack adult role models in sports. She urged "if you don't want to do it for yourself—think about what you can do for your daughter."

Donna Edman, from the Office for the Status of Women and Jo Milne-Home, MediaSwitch representative and member of the Women's Research Centre, presented a profile of sportswomen in the media.

Prominent sportswomen Ann Mitchell, Kerry Saxby, Donna Ritchie and Penny Gulliver described the struggle for recognition, support, media coverage and sponsorship that they have experienced in their respective sports.

Anne-Marie Jonson  
Publicity & Promotions Officer  
Women's Research Centre

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## THE WOMAN FROM SNOWY RIVER

Ann Mitchell

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There was movement at the SCG for the word had passed around  
That the Poms were set to take the Ashes home  
All the great and well-known players  
From the states Australia wide  
Quickly gathered at the Grandstand overnight  
For the cricketers love the challenge when the Poms are here to play  
And the media sniff the battle with delight.

There was D K Lillee who made his mark when Chappell led the team  
The old man with his hair so thin and grey  
But few could match it with him when his blood was really up -  
He would bounce that ball and terrorise the foe  
And Mark and Steven Waugh came down to lend a hand  
No better batsmen ever swung a bat  
Those Pommie bowlers couldn't beat them with the ball -  
For they'd learnt to play while juniors in the west.

And one was there a woman in a skirt and long dark hair  
She was something like Mike Whitney undersized  
With a touch of Bradman class - quite a thoroughbred for sure -  
And such as are by media often praised  
She was fit and tough and wiry - just the sort that won't say die  
There was courage in her quick impatient tread  
And she bore the badge of gameness in her bright and fiery eye  
And the proud and lofty carriage of her head.

But still so small and slender one would doubt her strength to throw  
And the old man said "that girl will never do  
For the long and tiring innings - my dear you'd better step aside  
Those Poms are far too tough for such as you"...

When they reached the centre wicket even Lillee sucked in breath  
For the Poms were smashing fours all round the field  
The crowd were getting restless and the cans were flying fast  
But the woman with the skirt on pulled her hair back with a pin  
And took the ball the captain offered her  
And she ran in to the wicket like a wildcat after prey  
While the others watched and dreaded one more four.

She sent the off-stump flying and then started in for more  
And she finished with a hat trick in the end  
And the woman from Snowy River hardly ruffled a single hair  
As she won that test and crushed that Pommie team...

And out here west of Sydney where the plains are flat and dry  
The grasses and the trees so burnt and brown  
Where the air is hot and humid and the people feel locked in  
Away from beach and cooling coastal winds  
And where upon the Kingswood campus  
Women gather with much to say  
To the students and the research workers there  
The woman from Snowy River is a dream that haunts us all  
But perhaps the dream will one day come unfold.

## POWER AND POSSIBILITIES: MAKING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY A LIFETIME CHOICE

Libby Darlison

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As the title of my talk today suggests I don't *only* want to talk about sport and sportswomen but also about the broader concepts of physical activity and women. In doing so I will be assuming that sport is also physical activity and that sportswomen are also women. This is not of course an assumption that everyone in the community has always been prepared to make.

Sport of course we all understand - or do we. Sport is, "the ultimate Australian religion, the only thing Australians believe in passionately, has no knockers, can do no wrong, helps to unify Australia as a nation". I could go on and talk about how Australian national heroes are largely cricketers, how Phar Lap would rate more highly than any politician (with due respect to our guest many of us would have no difficulty believing that today) and Don Bradman higher than any artist.

This is of course the myth of the sport playing, fit and healthy Australian (male) that we all grew up with. While it remains true that some sports and some sportsmen are still given the status of heroic institution and heroic individual, especially around election time, the reality is quite different. We do recognise some sportsmen far more readily than we recognise our painters, writers, poets and performers, but many of our sportswomen, (of world class standing) remain unknown and unrecognised. In fact we are not a nation of participants, we are a nation of spectators and even here we are very selective about what sports we watch and, with respect to television particularly, what sports we are given the opportunity to watch.

We are not healthy and fit, and we do not, as the wife of a former United States Ambassador to this country once observed, live in a huge gymnasium where everyone is always playing or practising something. By and large we are sedentary and overweight and, the ACHPER fitness surveys tell us, so are our children, particularly our female children, when compared to their peers in other countries.

To put it more simply, despite our belief in the great Australian sporting myth, we have never placed a high priority on being and feeling fit and healthy. While this statement holds true for Australians as a whole it is especially relevant for one group in particular - females.

The importance and the ramifications for women of being fit and healthy and feeling good about themselves is, I believe, underrated even in the best of times, and these are certainly not the best of times. We are, as newspaper headlines scream at us almost daily, living in difficult times. This entity called 'the economy', proudly held aloft by the new gurus of economic rationalism is beginning to dominate all our lives, whether we want it to or not.

The new buzz words are 'productivity', 'competitiveness', 'rationalization'. Other key words are 'interest rates', 'unemployment', 'recession' and maybe even the big "D" word.

Since it is women who always bear the brunt of a tightening and slowing economy it is perhaps understandable that the importance to them of becoming, or even staying physically fit and maintaining regular physical activity, is reduced even more when



competing with concerns such as getting or keeping a job, meeting the mortgage payments or the rent, clothing the children or just making it between pay packets.

In comparison with these pressing issues I can understand that something as apparently frivolous as sport and physical activity, something that has historically been seen as a male realm anyway, might be seen to have little relevance to women's lives.

Having said that I understand these arguments, I should also point out that I don't agree with them. I am someone who thinks that, no matter what the current economic conditions or the prevailing theory or indeed the historical cultural mythology, sport and physical activity can contribute not only to the life of the nation, but to women's lives in a unique and important way. Let me explain why.

Perhaps, in the light of what I've just been saying about economic rationalism we can start with the "economic argument" i.e. the economic benefits of involvement in regular physical activity. It is now becoming apparent, even to the medical profession who have not in the past been known for their support of exercise as a preventative health measure, that taking part in enjoyable and appropriate physical activity three to four times a week can greatly reduce or even prevent the onset of some of this nation's most common and expensive health problems.

Of course ill health does not just impact on the economy, its effect can be seen most directly upon the personal and work lives of the individual and those she relates to most closely. Nevertheless Australia does have a national health problem. Since 1974 total health expenditure has more than trebled, increasing at the rate of more than 15% per annum, while expenditure on preventative health programs has fallen and now represents less than one half of one percent of recurrent health costs.

Most of the costs of health care fall in areas where significant preventative efforts are possible i.e. in lifestyle health problems such as heart disease, certain forms of cancers and other common and chronic health problems such as back problems.

We can of course add to this picture some of the ill health (mental and physical) which is considered to be a "natural" consequence of the ageing process such as reduced bone density, (leading to osteoporosis and broken bones in older women particularly) depression and blood pressure difficulties.

While it is extremely difficult to calculate the monetary cost to the community of each of these problems, we can get some idea of the enormity of the situation if we take coronary heart disease - the single most frequent cause of death in Australia - as an example.

Using 1985 figures the costs relating to heart disease including medical (\$2,685m), pharmaceutical (\$1,182), ambulance (\$297m) and hospital (\$5,923) we come up with a total of \$10,087m. In addition, consultations for hypertension and heart disease represent 12.4% of all medical consultations and the direct cost of these medical services can be calculated at \$333m.

While these figures are impressive just as they are, they become even more so when we find out that recent activity levels are the most crucial in determining the protection against cardiovascular disease. In other words, being active when we were adolescents or young adults will not provide any protection unless we have maintained that level of activity throughout our lives; neither will seasonal bursts of activity.

Regular physical activity has an effect on the risk of cardiovascular disease which is independent of other risk factors and that activity does not have to be excessively vigorous.



So even if we are only interested in the economic costs of not being involved in regular physical activity with respect to this one example alone the message is quite clear.

As you might have gathered I am not simply interested in encouraging more girls and women to take up regular physical activity because it will save us all money.

The more I talk to women who have had a life of regular physical activity the more I realise that the benefits cannot be measured in economic terms. Indeed I have never yet struck one woman who says "I do it because it saves me and the nation a lot of money".

The sorts of responses one is much more likely to get are: "I feel better about myself", "I feel in touch with my body", "I feel as if my body belongs to me", "it gives me much more energy", "if I don't do it I can really feel the difference".

Note that the key word coming through in all of these responses is the word "feel". How we feel about ourselves as women is tied intrinsically to how we feel about our bodies. It may not be the only guideline but it is certainly a very important one.

We women will go to extraordinary and horrific lengths using every artificial means available to us to achieve what we think is the right bodily image - and we start very young. We will starve ourselves - figures in Australia for anorexia are on the increase and in the USA the estimation is that one teenage girl in ten is anorexic.

We rarely open a "women's magazine" without finding a whizz-bang new diet each seemingly more bizarre than its predecessor. Weight loss centres flourish, playing on a woman's insecurity about her body image and ultimately her sexual attractiveness, and the diet industry has been calculated as a \$32 billion industry.

We spend \$20 billion on cosmetics as much to hide our flaws as to enhance our features and perhaps the most bizarre practice of all, cosmetic surgery — a \$20 billion industry— is becoming commonplace amongst certain groups of women.

Now I am not suggesting that women will give up all of these practices if they become physically active on a regular basis. What I am saying is that if young girls were encouraged to be physically active early in their lives they would view their bodies in a very different way and that they would feel empowered by their physical prowess. If that activity pattern continues throughout their lives they are much more likely to accept the body they have as something they can live with comfortably and perhaps even enjoy.

Perhaps most important they will not constantly seek external approval, most usually from males, or undergo bizarre, painful and often dangerous practices to gain that approval.

"Oh that's OK for you, you've probably been active all your life" I hear you say. Its too late for me. I'm too old, I haven't got any confidence any way and I wouldn't know where to start. Let me say right now that it is never too late.

There is increasing evidence that regular physical activity can significantly improve health and improve the quality of life at any age. Obviously the younger one starts the better, but young girls are also going to find it difficult if they don't have adult role models. So if you don't want to do it for yourself — think about what you can do for your daughter.

For the numbers of girls and women involved in regular physical activity to increase, whether it be training for the Olympic Games or power walking for fitness or weight

control, there will need to be more than a personal commitment on the part of each individual.

This is not just a personal problem we are talking about, it is also political and as such it involves changing the power structure at every level to ensure that girls and women are given equal opportunities.

Schools need to be lobbied to ensure that girls, too, are provided with incentives and encouragement. This doesn't mean just introducing Aussie sports for everyone, it means looking carefully at the nature and the structure of the sports and activities girls enjoy doing and perhaps emphasising those activities and skills which can be enjoyed throughout life.

Local government needs to be reminded that its OK to build facilities but if they don't have associated child care or can only be used by women in "off peak" times they probably won't be used at all.

Special efforts need to be made to target 'at risk' groups. For example we know that up to 60% of adolescent girls drop out of sport and that very few of them ever 'drop in' again. And we also know that women with young children often feel very isolated, have a diminished self image and could be helped not only to be more active, but to feel better about themselves and far less isolated.

Sportswomen need to be prepared to speak out and become far more political about the issues which concern them. For example, they receive less than 2% of all newspaper coverage devoted to sport and are often presented on television in a manner which emphasises their gender rather than their achievements. There are often quiet complaints about such treatment but rarely will sportswomen voice those complaints in a public forum. This is a pity because someone who has just won a gold medal is much more likely to be listened to than someone who is speaking on her behalf.

Being physically active can be an extraordinarily empowering and liberating experience. It is not too dramatic to say that it can change one's life and open up all sorts of possibilities — you'll only know what I mean when you try it. Its an experience that I believe every female should be free to choose — for all of her life.

## WOMEN ON THE MOVE: KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Hon Dr Marlene Goldsmith, MLC

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Thank you very much for inviting me to launch *Women on the Move* here in the electorate of my colleague Mr Guy Matheson MP, who sends you all his best wishes for a most successful event.

I am delighted to be here for two reasons. Firstly, all politicians love to be asked to make speeches. Secondly, and more seriously though, the issue of women's participation in sport is one that is very dear to my heart - so much so that several years ago when the then Minister for Education in NSW, the Hon. Rod Cavalier, said that cricket is not played by women, I got my dander up and wrote an article on the subject for the Sydney Morning Herald.

Doing the research for that article was an eye opener for me.

I learned that the Australian women's cricket and netball teams repeatedly took out world championships but that these triumphs were repeatedly ignored by the media. I learned that for every man playing football in Australia, there were ten women playing netball, yet for all the public attention this activity received, these thousands of women were apparently invisible.

I learned that at the Geelong Triathlon, the first man home won two return air tickets to Hawaii and the first woman - a bicycle.

I examined a survey of television sporting coverage by the Women in Sport Foundation in the early 80s. Over a two week period, men's sport occupied 49 1/2 TV hours, dogs and horses got 3 hours and women 49 seconds.

Since then, it is fair to say there has been an improvement. We can now, occasionally even see Australia's most popular competitive sport, netball, on TV. Not often — and nearly often enough to reflect its popularity — but the change has started.

And in the wake of media coverage has come that important support, commercial sponsorship. Companies will support women's sport, if they believe they will get a return on their investment, in the form of publicity. Things are on the move.

At least now there is less likelihood of the humiliating experience of some years ago, when the Taiwanese Government paid for the Australian Women's Netball Team to go to the Asian Games, because no Australian business or Government was willing to provide any support at all.

Yes, women do play sport and yes, people will watch women playing sport on TV, as Olympic and Commonwealth Games coverage has repeatedly proved over the years.

But what has all this to do with you and me? I don't know about all of you, but I am the ultimate bunny at sport. Whenever teams were being picked when I was at school, I was always the last one chosen. So, why do people like me, people who will *never* represent Australia at netball, need to worry about women's sport and its media treatment?

For one reason, it matters because the message that girls and women receive, when the mass media ignore our activities, is that we don't matter and what we do doesn't

matter. That is a corrosively destructive message to women's self esteem and self confidence and I would argue that women will never have a genuinely fair go in our society until our activities, interests and efforts are accorded the same level of attention and importance as the activities of men.

But women's sport is far more crucial than simply a matter of fairness, important though that is. Women's sport is also a matter of health and even survival.

A recent report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that far more men (39.3 percent) than women (28.2 percent) do a high level of exercise. The Bureau's definition of "a high level" is some 40 to 60 minutes per week of physical activity which causes sweating or heavy breathing - not exactly a demanding requirement, one would think.

Of great concern today to professionals in the recreation, sport, physical education and health fields is research findings which show that on average, the aerobic fitness of girls declines from the age of 12; girls are far less skilled than boys in hand to eye co-ordination; twice as many men participate in regular physical activity as women.

In short, women tend to be far less fit than men.

Physical unfitness is a cost to the community in the demands it makes on the health care system. More than that, it is a cost to the quality of life of many women, who are being cut off by social habits and expectations from a whole range of leisure activities, whose health and wellbeing are not as good as they should be, and whose lives are being cut short by unfitness.

Why does this happen to girls?

Well, I think there are at least two reasons.

First the media "invisibility" of most adult women's sports leads many girls at the age of puberty to decide that sport is not feminine or normal for them - at least not unless they are a Lisa Curry or Steffi Graf.

Second there is what happens at school. Government reports have found schools to be unfair in their treatment of girls' and boys' sports - boys have in the past got more playground space, more resources and more fuss made over them when they won.

Girls experience a major drop in self-esteem at around the age of puberty, and researchers have connected this with girls' realising the lack of status and opportunity for women, in comparison with men, in our society.

Boys at school have been reported as taunting girls with accusations of inferiority. We have all heard the claim "Girls aren't any good at sport". Indeed, how many male sports commentators have you heard on commercial radio stations taunting a macho male star with the accusation that he was "playing like a girl"? What do you think such callous statements do to the fragile self esteem of young girls who are already beginning to realise the disadvantages of being female?

This all sounds rather gloomy, I suppose, because I am angry at the discrimination that still persists in our society. But the news is far from all bad. The New South Wales Women's policy statement is pledged to work towards a more comprehensive coverage of women's sport in the media and both the Department of School Education and the Department of Sport, Recreation and Racing have produced policy statements for girls and women and are also pursuing initiatives to achieve a fairer go.

For instance, a pilot health and fitness program is being trialled at Plumpton High School, here in Western Sydney, with visitors like marathon runner Tani Ruckle coming to the school.

The best news here is that schools have recently reported a trend that shows a small but steady increase in the involvement of girls in competitive sport in schools.

Another trend is the increasing involvement of girls in sports which have previously been exclusively participated in by males. For instance on 15th September Amy Kebby of Eden Primary School played on the wing in her school rugby league team when they won the State Primary Schools Knockout Rugby League Championships (Westmont Shield) at the Parramatta Stadium.

Sport is not just for men and boys and not just for the elite. It is for all of us, even the bunnies like me. If we are going to be fit, and active, and healthy, and confident, if we are going to take pride in our strength as an integral part of our femininity, then we must *all* participate.

Things are happening to make this possible — and I can think of no better example than today's *Women on the Move* day. Congratulations to the organisers, Dr Christine Wieneke, Jo Milne-Home and Joanna Syriatowicz for such an important initiative in bringing sport and women together again.

What is best of all about today for me, is that it includes so many fun things that are non competitive.

Competitive sport is great — but if you are like me and have never been very good at it, or if you have been away from physical activities for a long time, or if you feel just plain anxious about trying something new, all these activities are fantastic because you are competing against only one person — yourself.

So try tai chi, aerobics, power walking, self defence or even the swamp romp - and it won't matter if you get back last of all, because there is not team to let down.

And when you do all that and have a fantastic time, then tell other women about it. Spread the news.

Have a great day!

## IS WOMEN'S SELF DEFENCE A BANDAID - OR A POWERFUL DEVICE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

Penny Gulliver

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I have been teaching self defence since 1976 and have found it to be the most powerful tool for changing consciousness that it has been my experience to work with.

The hats I have worn in the past 17 years include feminist activist, student activist, conference organiser, therapist, naturopath, group leader, crisis counsellor, refuge worker and, of course, self defence teacher.

What women's self defence offers is a direct transcendence of intellectual barriers through movement, energy, noise, laughter and emotional input that allows basic feminist concepts to blend in with explosive action.

### Basic Feminist Concepts

Like:

1. Women are essentially conditioned into an allotted slot — to be vulnerable victims — and men have a monopoly on power.
2. There is an intricate structure that works against women, and violence is one of the tools. Violence is not perpetrated by a few psychotic individuals.

"I feel all women must cultivate a wide range of emotional expressions so that they may be tough if the situation calls for it. Unfortunately the task of sharpening up the Snow White qualities is easier than the Prince Charming or warrior qualities because of the pigeon holes that men and women have been put into. Man hunter, woman hunted. Me Tarzan, you Jane. Let's try and break through these barriers - stereotypes that cripple our abilities to be a whole person at best and prevent us from defending ourselves at worst." <sup>1</sup>

This may seem rudimentary to most of the women attending this conference but to the average woman who may be at home with kids, in the office or factory or school or nursing home or refuge or university, this concept may be very profound and complex.

As a crisis counsellor I found it inappropriate to introduce such concepts to women in immediate crisis and still experiencing shock who must use all their energy to deal with the emergency that is at hand, but it is very important for the counsellor to have this feminist understanding so she can give supportive non-blaming subliminal messages. Hard-hitting feminist rhetoric is inappropriate when a woman is struggling to keep her head above water. Self defence can then be a very effective follow up in the rebuilding stage of overcoming a crisis.

It is very important that the teacher is a woman and a feminist who can keep the non-blaming, positive subliminal messages going as well as having her finger on the pulse

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<sup>1</sup> Gulliver, Penny. (1991) Self Defence for Women. Hale & Iremonger, cf Chapter 1: *Sugar and Spice*.

of hard-hitting feminist facts so she may redirect negative internalised messages that surface in most self defence classes.

"Inevitably I will ask the question "Do you think women ever ask to be raped?" and inevitably someone will always say "Yes". I ask "Under what circumstances?" They answer "If she is cheap". Then I ask "What does cheap mean?" She or they will say "She dresses in brief clothing". She acts flirtatiously among a group of men", "She bestows her sexual favours easily". This usually sets up a lively debate between the aware and not so aware...

We have to differentiate here between being responsible and being vulnerable. Even when a woman ends up in a vulnerable position she is never responsible for someone taking advantage of her situation." <sup>2</sup>

My experience as a teacher has given me the opportunity to very effectively link violence against women to a broad political reality within the context of a self defence class.

Women who seek out a self defence course often do this because they are scared of the "bogey man" who will jump out from behind a bush, on the surface. But if you scratch the surface you will find that they all have a lot less power than they would like to have even if the only symptom they are in touch with is a lack of brute force and fear of a knife-wielding stranger.

I have found that by demonstrating how to attain more physical power the path is pretty well clear for creating an appetite for more emotional and political power.

It is important to encourage the women in a self defence class to simultaneously look within as well as looking out at how the world operates and what they can do to help disturb the status quo.

The structure and cultural (pun intended) environment that allows the machismo virus to incubate is based on men having power and women not having it":

"Pride and Virility — the power of procreativity, capacity for sexual intercourse — is seen as the cornerstone of male supremacy. The link between machismo-infected sexuality and how society operates will form the basis of this chapter." <sup>3</sup>

I hope the participants at this conference will attend one of my practical workshops to experience the direct or should I say *directed* link between personal, political and physical power.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Chapter: *Machismo: Is there a Cure?*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



## THE LAST WORD: PROFILING ATHLETIC WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

Jo Milne-Home

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Donna Edman and I thought that we were privileged to be the ones to have "the last word". You might well ask about where our athletes are in the media or suspect that there is a whole history of women in sport that has gone unsung and definitely unrecorded by any media enterprise after the presentations given on the program today. Other speakers have alluded to the silence that has been all too evident in our public record of winning women. Australian Sports Commission Survey (1984) data showed that women's sport is given less than 2.5% of print media space and our press release for today's event went out on Melbourne Cup day proclaiming that dogs and horses get better press than our winning women do. 'Fast women' get coverage but if fast women are covered on the track and field circuit, or in any other sporting venue, the two meanings of fast are captured with emphasis on the sex appeal aspect. The erotic image is the one that sells to a predominantly male audience; the target audience of sports coverage, according to media commentators and journalists.

Representations of sport are riddled with the assumption that sport is masculine. The profiling of athletic women in the media does much to protect the social and historical constructions of masculine and feminine ideals. The prescriptions of the feminine are at variance with many of the characteristics necessary for success in the sporting arena. The ways in which women come to be positioned in public images of athleticism or sport — how they are portrayed as players or partakers of physical activity — is important to the perception of social meanings that are valid or legitimate for women. Images of successful women are particularly problematic.

The conclusions of the National Working Group on Women and Sport which reported to the Commonwealth Government in 1985 can be found in a report **Women Sport and the Media.**<sup>1</sup>

"The media and sport provide two powerful socialising influences in Australian society. They provide evidence of, an opportunity to emulate, role models on which people, especially young people base their attitudes and behaviour. The confluence of those two elements ... creates a highly potent socialising influence. We believe that the subconscious 'message' from the way in which women in sport are presented is that their activity is not intrinsically as worthy or important as men's sport.

"... We believe that, as much as the media, especially television, reflect the community within which they operate, they also inevitable shape the direct attitudes, behaviour and priorities. What is seen on television, heard on radio or read in the newspapers, sanctions what is acceptable or expected. What does not appear in those forums can end up being trivialised, ignored or rendered unable to compete with other 'normal' activities when it comes to establishing and sustaining a priority either for resources or general attention and concern.

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<sup>1</sup> The Report can be obtained from the Women's Sport Promotion Unit (WSPU), PO Box 176, Belconnen, ACT, 2613.

"We believe that, in general, women's sport in Australia, and the involvement and participation of women and girls of all ages and at all levels in the community in either elite or recreational sport, has suffered the consequences of a long tradition of prejudice and lack of concern. That situation has been both reflect and to a large extent caused by the inadequate coverage of women's sport in the media." (Australian Sports Commission and the Office of the Status of Women, 1985)

Media images are important to any social construction of reality — and in the land of the 'fair go' and the 'little Aussie battler' the image of the athlete celebrates a masculine ethos. Sport has become linked with what Gretchen Grinnell, an American psychologist refers to as the Testosterone Imperative — and I am not talking about the dodgy issue of drugs in sport — but how sport has taken on a definition that is so closely connected to the masculine identity that it is 'in the blood' as it were. Thus sport is seen as somehow unnatural for women to be involved in. The testosterone imperative insists that women collude in the folly that legitimates male strength, aggression, dominance and superiority.<sup>2</sup> Libby Darlison and Lois Bryson made similar comments at the first National Conference on Women in Sport and Recreation (1980) at the University of NSW. These prominent sociologists in the area of women and sport suggest dominant ideology would blame our genes or our blood for the products of history and the politics of sex/sexuality.<sup>3</sup> The Oestrogen Response becomes one of complementarity — like the car from a sponsor the feminine woman is seen as a trophy or prize — where winners are entitled or privileged to choose. The 'bimbo' or 'sex kitten' factor is one endorsed by media promotions while women winning international tournaments never 'get up'. Media images reinforce this dimorphism by publishing pictures of club beauty queens and cheer squad antics in spaces that could be used to report female athletic news. Such practices trivialise women in sport by associating women's role in sport as a sideline activity. It is sadly a fact that Australian dogs and horses receive more media coverage than our excellent athletes.

Australian sociologist Bob Connell has written about the way sport promotes male solidarity or mateship: those images of men training and sparring together in the genre of "if you've got it, flex it";<sup>4</sup> that stuff that makes movies like *Chariots of Fire*, where images of being tough, enduring against the odds, the honour of victory, the agony and ecstasy in triumph. The statement is embedded in the athletic body — the body that is tall, taut, terrific and defined by the muscular tension, the strength in the bulge — the Olympian, the victor born on the shoulders of other men. The drama of ultimate dedication where athlete, sports psychologist and coach are totally committed to an event and the symbolism of the prize. And when this symbolism is scrutinised we have all the elements of battle where sport becomes 'war' in peace time. David Salter, ABC Sport (1990), insists that the reason why women are not media favourites is that they lack the magic of men's sport. The glamour of sport is in the combat, the competition, the conflict and the body contact. Violence in sport is supported by the box office and TV ratings.

Lois Bryson insists that challenging the stereotypes of gender is only the beginning of any analysis of why it is unacceptable for women to aspire to win in physical activities as sport becomes a ritual of male dominance and this connects with aspects of aggression, anger, violence and symbols of war. The price of victory includes self determination, setting goals and strategies to ensure success, going out after first place

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2 Grinnell, 1987, pp 41 - 58.

3 NSW Women's Advisory Council, 1980.

4 Blue, 1987

and sacrificing all others and all else in this quest.<sup>5</sup> This planning and putting into practice strategies for success is antithetical to attributions associated with the feminine — the 'natural', the good fortune and good luck where success is attributed to some external locus of control.

After all, sport is not for ladies, it's 'out of bounds'.<sup>6</sup> In order for women to succeed they have to challenge colossal public pressure that fashions the feminine as docile, nurturing, tender, soft, conforming, courteous, gracious, noncompetitive and all those characteristics of the mother or perfect virgin/whore. Fashioning the feminine body as weak, elegant, pre-pubescent, graceful, soft, round, relaxed, small, feline is consistent with the socialisation of feminine temperament. Winning women are at odds with this body and temperament in ways fundamental to cultural prescriptions that have become codes of acceptability. In fact one of the first 'mistakes' our winning women make is to take themselves and their sport seriously as this is the antithesis of 'true' feminine behaviour and form. Being strategic, rational and having the fortitude to sustain a training program suggests effort, purpose and direction which has some sectors wondering whether women athletes are women or minotaurs with female heads.

Histories of expert advice to women insist on confounding social constructions of women with biology. The feminine body has to be fleshed out with a temperament that is mild and never mean. If a woman should ever succeed the best that can be said is that she was lucky or blessed lest anyone think she showed signs of vanity and deliberate effort to prove herself better, or dare to be best. Such dictums as 'modesty is virtue' and 'duty before pleasure' may seem to belong to another time and place, but there is an element of the Victorian in the modern feminine temperament. And if our bodies were really meant for anything then surely the 'monthly incapacity' should remind us of its weakness and how 'delicate' our organs are if they should bleed so frequently. 'Mothers of tomorrow' would surely tolerate no foolish gambling with this 'temple' of flesh that would furnish offspring when the time is 'ripe'. Images of nature inscribed on our bodies

We have still to outgrow many of our cultural myths — and the myth makers aren't helping. Our 'old wives' of today are alive and well among sports commentators and family doctors. Bill Mandle, Head of the School of Communication and Sports Columnist for the Canberra Times insists that 'the only thing worth watching and the only thing worth reading about is men's sport ... Women don't want to watch women's sport! They have been brought up watching the best athletic performances and athletic sporting spectacles' (1990). ABC's Quentin Dempster accused sports commentators of being stuck in the 40s, but then Quentin is kind. To be perfectly short, experts have told us over and over again that it is not in our nature to compete. Meanwhile, statistics tell another story; our women are winning gold and have a better record of winning than our men (Woman's Sport Promotion Unit, 1990).

The emergence of women in sport is not only a refashioning of body image and a fantastic provocation for archetypes of womanhood in psychology, but an historical phenomenon that changes perceptions of women's capabilities, women's strength and the power of women who have a passion for excellence. Real women, and not caricatures of athletic women, challenge the idea that excelling in sport is unfeminine along with the myth that taut, tall, trim, terrific athletic bodies are bodies spoilt for child bearing. Interviews with women about the conflict between their identities as sporting women/stars and the cult of feminine beauty reveals the tension played out in women's lives. Athletes tell stories that detail a social history beyond the ploy of Beauty versus the Beast enmeshed in rivalries, drugs, prejudices and a strange eclipsing of politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Dyer, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Lenskyj, a writer and researcher in Toronto, Canada, and an advocate on issues of women in sport wrote a book by this name in 1986.

Kerry Saxby commented that she suspected that people saw her as half human and half beast — and while the half that was human was masculine, the beast was definitely some monster.

Many women in sport suffer from what Colette Dowling refers to as the 'Cinderella Complex'<sup>7</sup> — of having entered the arena and found that it really had a MEN ONLY label on it that we somehow did not see in our rush to enjoy the playing field. It is a little like being an academic from where I stand. Having entered, it becomes imperative to be the E-Type woman — that woman who must struggle to be everything for everyone, everywhere — the perfect woman.<sup>8</sup> For example, it should surprise few of us that gymnasts have the highest rate of anorexia nervosa in sport as this is a sport where girls can be girls but never be women.<sup>9</sup> It is also a sport that men and dads attend in great numbers. So women who win must do so graciously and with a humility that insists that God given qualities include speed, dexterity, elegance and a quite remarkable flexibility. Distance runners, along with gymnasts have the lowest fat to body-weight ratio in sport and they are the most photographed among female athletes, a fact that should surprise no scholar in the women's studies area.

The drive to succeed, the struggle with fears of inadequacy — and all those pressures that undermine self esteem — become the focus for reporting when women enter the tabloids as athletes. Performance rather than vanity is key here but women in sport are considered more feminine if signs of having reached puberty are nowhere evident.

Athletic women are often thrown into images of narcissistic posturing that mirrors perfection and signals the ultimate neuroticism of compulsive grooming. The struggle to be faster, stronger, fitter — the necessity to be the best is somehow trivialised by images that reduce this quest for excellence to a concentration on 'body image'. The compulsion to excel becomes part of an anorexic personality type — being perfect — killing herself by denying certain truths about the 'nature' of woman. This play on the effort required to excel shifts the focus from the dreams of running or swimming that perfect race, to the anguish over training the body. The assumption in all of this reduction of effort to producing a fit body belongs to an ideology based on women as objects of heterosexual desire; woman as being attractive. We may be excused if we find images of very able athletes cast in the same mode as women battling the bulge at a Jenny Craig or Gloria Marshall weight loss centre ... and therein lies another paradox, the sponsorship of women's sport. To gain sponsorship it would seem that men have to 'fight' while women have to 'flirt' with the public. While women have to appeal to men there can be no equity in coverage or sponsorship. Interviews with female athletes are powerful reminders of the fact that women are still paying a high price for their pursuit of victory or gold. However, few athletes will speak out on this issue as women who 'whinge' have anything but a sporting chance of sponsorship or team selection.

If we have learnt anything from our speakers today, it is that Australian women have had fantastic success. It really bowls me over when I look at the impressive record of our athletes on international tracks, swimming pools and playing fields. And we are honoured to have some of those winning women here today. I am a little coy about admitting that their victories have sometimes had me shrieking with excitement and suspense in my living-room but I will risk this one. When Lisa Martin crossed the finishing line of that Commonwealth Marathon in New Zealand — I was exhausted ... When Tani Ruckle came across ... I *think* I identified so powerfully that it was a lucky

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7 Dowling, 1989.

8 Braiker, 1987

9 Blue, 1987

save for me that I was supported by the cushions when those legs went from under her. My mother, my daughter and I were all there like so many of us in this country — and around the Commonwealth — focusing on our women who win for us all.

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