

She's fast for her age! Older women and running culture

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Abstract: In the 19th and early 20th centuries, running was the exclusionary sport of younger men. Women, particularly older women, were discouraged from participating in competitive running up until the 1970s. In seeking to understand the reasons for this interdiction, this study employs Foucault's concept of discourse to explore the ways in which medicalized notions about the female body have mitigated women's involvement in running from the early 1900s until present day. The paper begins with a targeted literature review that identifies relevant biomedical and moral discourses. Findings are then presented from in-depth interviews with four elite women runners over the age of fifty. The analysis of these participants' accounts of their running histories reveal that while women runners have gained new freedoms, a discriminatory discourse remains, one that sexualizes and commodifies the female athletic body.

Key Terms: running, older women, discourse, aging, sexualization

Introduction

In western society, running culture has historically been regarded as the province of young men; women and older adults were discouraged and even prevented from participating in competitive running events for most of the early part of the 20th century. Given this history, current increased participation of older women in the sport of running is of particular interest, given that they tend not to conjure up images of athleticism. This study takes a closer look at the phenomenon of the older woman runner and provides an experiential account of running culture from the perspective of four women runners over the age of fifty. The analysis reveals that while new freedoms have undeniably been gained, the discourses that mediated these women's participation in running reflect past and current gender stereotypes. As running culture is largely informed by broader sociocultural contexts, analyzing the intersection of discourses concerning age, gender, the body, and sport contributes to our understanding of how the sporting practices of aging women are "historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined" (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 390).

Theoretical framework

Discourse analysis is the framework that guides this study. Foucault (1977) defines discourse as "assemblages of statements arising out of ongoing conversations, mediated by texts, among speakers and hearers" (cited in Wearing, 1995, p. 264). Normalized and embedded in culture, discourses shape individual subjectivities and coordinate social practices by influencing people's perceptions and understandings of the social world. Within discourse exist power relations that "construct, regulate and control knowledge, social relations and institutions" while also enabling and delimiting "fields of knowledge and inquiry, and...govern[ing] what can be said, thought and done within those fields" (Luke, 2001, Poststructuralist and Postmodern Discourse Theory, para. 2-3). However, power relations and their associated discursive practices can be challenged and resisted. The history of women's running bears witness to women constructing their own athletic subjectivities by subverting the patriarchal and

medical discourses of their times and challenging the limitations imposed upon them by experts and institutions supposedly concerned with their welfare. Their efforts constituted a series of counter-discourses that successfully justified their involvement in the sport. This ultimately paved the way for the phenomenon of the older woman runner, which in itself challenges ageist medicalized discourses.

In its first section, this paper briefly summarizes the history of women's involvement in the sport of running, highlighting the manner in which female runners and activists challenge patriarchal and medical discourses. The following section reports on the findings derived from the in-depth interviews conducted with the women who participated in this study. The findings illustrate how discourses are enacted in the everyday lives of older female runners.

Literature review

Understanding the discourses informing the historical exclusion of women from the sport of running is an important prerequisite for understanding women's current position within running culture. Although women have made significant advancements in creating a space for themselves in what has historically been a male sport, traditional discourses concerning gender, the female body, and age continue to exert an influence. As the historical participation of women in sport cannot be understood apart from the behaviours and attitudes of broader sociocultural contexts (Vertinsky, 1994, p. 9), this study investigates the practices of women in sport as "historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined" (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 390).

Early biomedical discourse

In late 19th and early 20th centuries, medicine was particularly concerned with "the very nature of woman and her physical and mental capacities" (McCrone, 1984, p.113). Notions about the "fragile" biology of women justified their exclusion from activities involving strenuous physical exertion (Vertinsky, 1994, p. 18). More specifically, physicians argued that women, unlike men, possessed a limited amount of energy that needed to be conserved for the development of reproductive organs during puberty (McCrone, 1984, p. 114). This idea evolved alongside biological theories conceptualizing menstruation as a pathological condition (Vertinsky, 1987, p. 7) and the general view that women were chronically weak, nervous, and high strung (Mewett, 2003, p. 335).

As a result, physicians and educators, as well as men in general, justified their opposition to women's involvement in sports, on the grounds that limited female energy should be devoted to more natural roles, such as reproduction and raising children. Female reproductive roles and functions were idealized by physicians beginning in the 19th century, who were instrumental in promoting the notion that the primary responsibility of a woman was to care for her children, particularly during pregnancy (Vertinsky, 1994). Mostly directed towards younger middle class women, this idea was associated with fears that improper care of the unborn child could affect the health of an entire nation (Mewett, 2003), as exemplified by W. G. Anderson's (1890) statement, "Can we expect a poor tree to bear good fruit? Can vigour come from weakness?" (p. 266). Physicians argued that as vigorous physical activity supposedly "strained" women's reproductive organs, only moderate exercise was suitable for enhancing health and childbearing capabilities (Hargreaves, 1985, p. 45). While physicians acknowledged that some level of fitness would help make better mothers, they felt that too much physical activity would cause a host of mothering problems (Mewett, 2003, p. 336). As a result, physicians recommended restricting women's involvement in sports and physical activity (Hargreaves, 1985, p. 45), perpetuating gendered and ageist inequalities in 19th century society. This medicalized discourse also extended to older woman,

whose social status was greatly diminished with the loss of their reproductive capacities. Physicians portrayed menopause as marked by disease and obsolescence, and, as Vertinsky (2000) notes, “in a medical sense...any notion of a healthy and vigorous active old age for women was a contradiction in terms” (p. 393).

Challenges to the biomedical discourse on women in sport emerged out of the North American’s educational system. Towards the end of the 19th century, as demands for women’s educational rights increased, physicians and educators continued to argue that the developing minds and bodies of girls were incapable of sustaining the strain of strenuous physical effort. The argument is that strain would deplete a woman’s energy levels, which could, in the long term, jeopardize her ability to bear healthy offspring (McCrone, 1984, p. 113). In response, advocates for women’s educational rights argued that such ideas were without foundation in science but instead reflected oppressive cultural norms (McCrone, p. 115). They argued that the qualities of humility, self-control, rationality, a sense of honour, respect for others, and an improved work ethic could all be acquired through rigorous and disciplined physical training (Herrick, 1902, p. 716-721). Sports and games were seen as instrumental to the healthy development of young women and in need of being integrated into “a systematic program of physical training and medical inspection intended to make students fitter for academic toil” (McCrone, p. 127).

However, sports advocates at girls’ schools nonetheless continued to subscribe to the values of moderation and respectable femininity. According to McCrone (1984), avoiding the conflation of vigorous physical activity with masculinity was paramount, which meant that certain sports remained off limit for women, particularly those requiring “physical contact, awkward positions, endurance, and great strength” (p. 131). Furthermore, the involvement of women in sports continued to be restricted by dress codes, rules, and time limits, which were designed to minimize the possibility that sports activity would result in “repulsive” muscularity (Hamilton-Fletcher, 1897, p. 534), “mannish lesbianism” (Parratt, 1989, p. 153), and a deleterious effect on a woman’s “essential femaleness” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 131). Of particular concern was the development of “masculine” traits such as aggression, boisterousness, and “the stigma of overt masculinity” (McCrone, 1984, p. 131) which could result in athletic women being labeled “hoydens” (McCrone, p. 132) or “brazen doxies” (Rhodes, 1978, p. 242). Also of concern were the detrimental effects of overexertion that would bring about pelvic disturbances and detrimental hormonal changes (Hill, 1903, p. 4; McCrone, 1984, p. 114). These concerns meant that school-based physical education programs for girls continued to emphasize low-intensity physical activities (Mewett, 2003, p. 335) and women’s involvement in sports remained subjected to mandatory medical inspections (Hill, 1903).

Breaking down gender barriers

It was not until the 1920s that women started to participate in more arduous sports. While still characterized by an ethos of “restrained physicality” (Mewett, 2003, p. 337), the concept of competition in women’s athletics began gaining acceptance. Female sports emerged from the secluded realm of all girls’ schools and gained a foothold in amateur competitions. In 1921, the Feminine Sportive Federation International (FSFI) became the first international governing body for women’s athletics (Kuscik, 1977, p. 863) and sponsored the first women’s world championships the following year. Despite the success of several other international meets, the FSFI’s request to the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) to have women’s athletics included in the 1924 Olympics was denied. Permission was not granted until the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam when five track and field events were sanctioned, the longest of which was 800 meters (two laps). As Kuscik (1977) argues, although inclusion of these events was initially considered as a victory for the sport of running, “the results of that historic occasion set

women's distance running back 50 years" (p. 864). She describes how, due to lack of training, many of the women failed to pace themselves properly and collapsed during the 800-meter run. Although the top three finishers broke the existing world record, the race was labeled a frightful event and taken by the media and track establishment as proof that women were not fit for distance running. The IAAF cancelled the 800-meter run and only reinstated it in the 1960 Summer Olympics.

Despite women's inclusion in the Olympics, there remained stringent restrictions governing the number and types of events in which women could participate. Echoing 19th century medical discourse, Sophie Elliott-Lynn (1925), Vice-President of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, stated that "women are primarily designated as mother, and the opportunities must never be given for harm to happen" (as cited in Mewett, 2003, p. 338). In 1929, the American National Amateur Athletic Federation went further and opposed female participation in Olympic running events to protect them from the strain of preparing for competition (Mewett, 1983, p. 338). In the distances in which women were allowed to compete, a prudent approach was adopted by conducting careful medical examinations throughout training and competition in order to prevent injuries (Kuscsik, 1977, p. 864). Despite the fact that records were being broken as fast as they were being set, women's athletics in the 1920s was largely seen as a "semi-serious" activity (Mewett, 2003, p. 339).

This lack of formal recognition persisted throughout the 1940s and 1950s, during which time little progress was made in women's athletics. It was not until the 1960s that the barriers that had long prevented women's full involvement in sports began to crumble. In the 1960s cultural context of protest and change, second wave feminism exerted an enormous influence on galvanizing women's involvement in running. As women began questioning the biological assumptions underlying traditional gender roles, the myth of women's athletic frailty came under siege. A growing awareness of the empowering potential of running emerged, and women athletes began to challenge the patriarchal norms that had restricted their involvement in sports (Besson, 1978). In particular, the sport of running was perceived as an opportunity for women to determine individually their own limits of strength, distance, speed, and endurance (Oglesby, 1981, p. 163).

In the late 1960s, women also increasingly challenged restrictions governing their involvement in sports. For example, women at the time were still deemed too fragile to endure the strain of long distance running and were denied official entry into marathon events (Vertinsky, 2000). The watershed moment in women's battle for inclusion in the marathon came when Katherine Switzer ran the 1967 Boston Marathon. Because she registered under the name of K.V. Switzer, race officials did not realize she was a woman until she was en route. The photograph of race official Jock Semple attempting to physically oust Katherine from the race made international headlines. Many women were inspired and followed Katherine's example; by the 1970s, women were increasingly being allowed to run in marathon races.

In the 1971 New York City Marathon, Nina Kuscsik and Beth Bonner became the first women marathoners to break the 3-hour mark (Kuscsik, 1977). In 1972, the Boston Marathon allowed women to compete while the women's marathon was officially sanctioned in the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. As Hargreaves (1984) remarks, the inclusion of the women's marathon in the Olympics was a great symbolic victory for women who had waged "a long and bitter battle against mythical past accounts of female inferiority" (p. 20). At the same time, new scientific findings demonstrated that the female musculoskeletal system was no more susceptible to injury than in men, which led The New York Academy of Sciences in 1977 to acknowledge that women equally benefited from long-distance running (Vertinsky, 2000). Exercise was also shown to reduce the pain and lethargy associated with

menstruation and complications during childbirth (Hargreaves, 1994). In fact, evidence was growing that women were potentially better suited than men for endurance events due to their greater resistance to fatigue.

Growing public enthusiasm for personal achievement and better health in the 1970s created grassroots support for the sport of running (Tulle, 2008). In addition, the Masters' athletics movement of the late 1960s provided a structure in which age-based attritions in performance were normalized, and older adults previously considered past their athletic prime (35 for women, 45 for men) were able to maintain their athletic identities (Tulle, 2008). The powerful, vital, and active image these athletes projected helped dispel the image of older adults as being passive, disabled, and dependent (Dionigi, 2006) while challenging concepts of "normal aging" and "appropriate physical activity" (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 400). Athletic prowess was no longer solely the province of the youth. Another factor that encouraged the participation of women was the rise of corporate involvement in running culture. In 1972, Crazylegs Shaving Cream sponsored the Crazylegs Mini Marathon – the first ever women's road race in Central Park, New York. Inspired by the race's success, Bonne Bell Cosmetics launched a series of women's 10km road races throughout North America. Avon followed suit in 1978 by sponsoring several international women's marathons to set a precedent to the International Olympic Committee for the inclusion of the women's marathon. By providing an environment less intimidating than male dominated events, these races became extremely popular and led to the rise of races for women, family fun runs, clinics, and articles on running in women's magazines.

Also influential was the fitness boom of the 1980s, during which the increased commodification of women's physical activity expanded. Although running was promoted to women as a means of staying fit and healthy, this was overshadowed by an overemphasis on beauty and the presentation of the body (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 399). Compared to the knee length pantaloons and long sleeved shirts of the early 1900s, the skimpy outfits epitomized by aerobics instructors uncovered the athletic female body as never before. The emerging images of "feminine" athleticism frequently sexualized style and appearance. As a result, the discourses restricting women's initial involvement in physical activity were reinforced, and the female athlete became objectified for the sexual desire of men.

In summary, the various discourses that mediated women's involvement in the sport of running evolved significantly over time. In the 1920s up to the 1960s, women had had to confront restrictive medical and moral discourses to negotiate the terms of their participation in running events. Although these older biomedical discourses have been disproved by modern scientific evidence, new discourses continue to shape women's running. While the involvement of women in the sport of running has been well documented historically, there is a lack of information on the manner in which such involvement was and continues to be experienced in the context of the everyday lives of the women who pioneered the sport and are now considered older female runners. This study addresses this gap in knowledge with findings from in-depth interviews with four older women who had extensive involvement in the sport of running.

Methods

Volunteering for this study were four older women with long-term and current histories of participating in the sport of running. The running histories of these participants are described in detail at the beginning of the findings section. Sampling was purposive and snowballed with selection based on age (≥ 50), gender (female), and level of involvement in the sport of running (extensive). Upon completion of the interview, the first participant put us in contact with three other women sharing the

same extensive level of involvement with running culture. As these were women who had trained and competed for numerous years at the national and international level, we surmised that they would possess greater knowledge and experience concerning the social changes affecting women's running when compared to recreational runners of the same age. The interviews were approximately one hour in length, and questions primarily focused on life events of "personal and social significance" (Jaffe & Miller, 1994, p. 143). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed to determine reoccurring themes and concepts within the data. Connections between themes and categories were identified and triangulated to map out the social phenomena of older women runners from the perspective of the participants. The findings illustrate the manner in which dominant socio-medical discourses shaped the lives of these older sportswomen.

Findings

The participants, Katherine, Abby, Joan, and Paula (pseudonyms), spoke of the varied social reactions to their involvement in the sport of running which they encountered throughout their lives. Katherine discovered her love of running when she was seven years old and joined a track club at the age of twelve. When she entered university in 1955, there were no women's track opportunities and her running career came to an end. After a long hiatus during her childbearing years, Katherine started running again as a way to lose the weight after her fourth pregnancy. Unfortunately, back problems waylaid her plans. In 1975, she started marathon running again and eventually broke numerous Canadian and world records. Currently in her early seventies, she continues to run and volunteer within her local running community.

In her youth, Abby played basketball and hockey and skied. In high school, she discovered her love of tennis, which she played avidly. Moving to BC following graduation, she met her husband, himself an avid skier and tennis player, and they had four children. While raising her family, Abby began running. Her first forays into running coincided with the fitness boom of the eighties, when running was becoming increasingly popular. Over time, Abby's performances have garnered her widespread recognition as an elite runner. As her eighty-fourth birthday approaches, Abby admits she is starting to consider slowing down. Although she has cut back on her road millage and increased her cross training in order to help preserve her body, her race times have begun to slow down. She reflects: "You sort of have to suck it up and realize you're older...you're going to slow down. But sometimes that's a bit difficult to accept. You just think, 'I'm getting awfully slow here. Maybe I should quit.'" Yet, despite her slower times, Abby states that it's her love of running that keeps her going: "it's amazing for your spirit just to go out and get that adrenalin rush."

At 58, Joan is the epitome of feisty. Animated and energetic, she describes herself as "a pretty hyper person and a pretty A type plus personality." Playing every sport she could as a child, her natural athletic talent rapidly became evident at an early age. Encouraged by her mother, she joined a track club in high school. With her accomplishments in high school track and field, she earned an athletic scholarship to university where she was able to pursue her running at the varsity level. Like Katherine and Abby, Joan had four children. She describes the challenges of fitting her running in: "all the years my kids were playing sports I would run while they were warming up...and I'd be watching them play all wet and smelly and I'd go to the grocery store with my hair all whatever." While Joan still runs, she reflects that her reasons for running have changed. Rather than the competitive running of her youth, Joan states, "I totally do it for just a release of my tensions and also because I can...I might not be able to ten years from now." Joan also feels that running is integral in helping her manage stress: "It's like all the file folders and all the papers that are in my brain all get put back in their place." Joan remains involved in

the running community by coaching young and upcoming athletes. She concludes by saying, "I don't do it for me anymore."

Paula describes her lifelong involvement with running as "an incredible vehicle for success." Although she was involved with a variety of different sports throughout her childhood, she notes that she "recognized quite quickly that running suited [her] quite well." Joining a track club in grade nine, she reflects that running rapidly "became sort of the main passion of [her] sport life." Like Joan, Paula earned an athletic scholarship to university with her track and field performances in high school. An injury changed the trajectory of Paula's running career. "I was priming to make the Olympic team and tore both my Achilles tendons....That was the end of my competitive career." Following an eight-year hiatus, Paula returned to running at the age of 34. Realizing she "couldn't take the abuse on the track," she became involved with road racing. She reflects: "That's where I started to see this incredible involvement of women road racing. I could see more and more women, and I wasn't a master's athlete yet." Throughout her competitive career, Paula feels she has received much support from her family, husband, and friends. She wonders: "if part of that could be the fact that I was able to be quite successful...If I hadn't been as successful would people have still been willing to accept my putting all this time into this?" Although she notices slower race results as she approaches her mid fifties, Paula's love of running hasn't diminished. She now coaches a local track club and looks forward to the increased training opportunities retirement will afford. In considering how long she thinks she will keep running for, Paula concludes

I would hopefully love it if I'm running almost until the day I die. Being able to go out and shuffle along through the forest. That would be fantastic. So I know it's possible unless something major gets in my way.

These women's comments illustrate the everyday experiences of the gendered and medicalized discourses that have framed the sport of running over the past several decades.

Cultural pressures

Katherine reflected that during her youth, her running often conflicted with cultural pressures to be feminine. Early in her athletic life, her vigorous running attracted criticism from her mother and grandmother, who were "appalled" and would often ask, "Why doesn't Katherine play tennis? That's a much nicer sport for girls to play than to be running around and jumping in pits." Although running in the mid 1970s became increasingly acceptable for women, Katherine recalled that when she announced her decision to start running again in middle age, her mother thought she was out of her mind and said that it could not be good for her. Katherine's comment illustrates how her mother and grandmother internalized the medical discourse about women and sport prevalent during that era. Joan also encountered similar reactions when she began to run seriously in the early 1970s. "It would get people honking," she said. She recounted an incident with the mailman:

He used to see me the same time every morning. He said, 'What are you doing? Training for the Olympics or something?' That's sort of the way he said it, like, 'You're crazy lady! What do you think you're doing?' And I remember looking at him and saying, 'Yeah. Actually I am.' And that was kind of cool for me.

Although Abby did not start running until the mid 1980s, she recalled a similar incident: "I had a neighbor. He used to say, 'there she goes, wasting all her energy.' And I'd go, 'I'm not wasting all my

energy! You should try this.’ He said it in jest, but deep within I think he really thought I was.” When asked why she thought he might think this, her response reflected early medical perceptions of the female body: “Well women in particular, I think the old witches’ tale about...your uterus, you shouldn’t be jiggling it like that.”

While such views are laughable to modern women runners, Katherine reflected on how they restricted long distance running for women in the 1950s. She remembered what women were told: It was dangerous for our reproductive health. That we might not be able to have children if we ‘overtaxed ourselves’...I’ve thought about that. Why did we take that crap? In the ‘50s there wasn’t a feminist approach to things. We were told, ‘Oh it’s dangerous for you and there’s no events. You can’t do it.’ And we just accepted that. It was not until the early sixties...that we began to say, ‘What is this? These men telling us what we can and cannot do with our bodies.’

Paula and Joan’s experiences in varsity competition during the 1970s show how these patriarchal medicalized views persisted. Paula recalled being twenty and the coach from another university saying, “When are you going to give this up?” And she said, “I’m not. I’m just getting going. What do you mean give it up? Give it up and have kids and be a wife? I’m not quite ready to do that yet.”

Running distances

Another prominent theme to emerge from the interviews was the role of distance running regulations in influencing the trajectory of these women’s running careers. Paula recalled that in the 1960s high school track and field was becoming increasingly popular for boys and girls, although “there were definitely events that the girls didn’t run.” She, along with a few friends, was able to convince their high school coach to allow a girls’ cross-country team, although they were restricted to running a mile and a half. Echoing Paula’s comments, Joan explains, “you could run the 100, the 200, the long jump, or the 800m.” She added frustratingly that “men were running marathons, men were running 5km, 10km, men were steeple chasing, men were running hurdles, doing all these events that none of us as women could do!” It was not until Paula and Joan entered university in the early 1970s that the distance restrictions started to crumble. Katherine described the removal of restrictions as having a “trickle down” effect: “Whenever an event wasn’t allowed at the international level, it wouldn’t happen down below for the talented runners.” As a result, Joan stated she was “always running the longest distance they had.” Ironically, as Katherine mentioned, these shorter events were actually more detrimental to young women: “We were allowed to run up to 220 yards which is totally a power event. I mean, you’ve got to be strong and muscular...There’s far more potential to injure a young girl’s body developing in her teens than...to run a longer race. But it wasn’t seen like that.” Similarly, Joan remarked:

A girl usually reaches puberty before a guy. And also they know that women have a greater capacity for endurance...and supposedly after you’ve had a baby the hormones change and you have more capacity for endurance. Well all these things about how we might shake up the insides of our reproductive systems, or we were going to do all this damage is interesting, because it’s exactly the opposite to what science has kind of proven. And that’s really sad.

Eventually, the successes of women runners in road racing helped discredit the validity of long distance regulations along with corporate-sponsored events geared specifically for the average female runner. Katherine recounted participating in these corporate sponsored races of the 1970s:

Unless you were a very competitive elite woman you would feel ‘there’s no place for me.’ Five percent of the women who are out running are young and competitive and the rest are all men, and the men are very competitive because it was a fairly small field. And it was an intimidating environment for women. And so the concept was, all right, we’ll have a race that’s for women only...It was strictly for giving women an opportunity to run in an environment where they wouldn’t feel uncomfortable with very competitive men all around.

Katherine also noted that these races helped dispel medical misconceptions about women’s involvement in running “by showing that women from 26 different countries can run a marathon and they’re fine and they’re thriving.” However, although the women’s running movement was gathering steam, Katherine said that the most significant gain in long distance running came when a women’s marathon event was included in the 1984 Olympic Games. At the time, she was a member of the board for the Women’s Association for the Advancement of Sport in Canada. She recalled the board debating how the International Olympic Committee was “discriminating against women at the international level” by not having a women’s marathon race in the Olympics.

Age and running

Women’s participation in long distance events was also hampered by concerns about age. Abby recalled that when she first started road racing in the mid 1980s, “fifty plus was as far as it went for the women. The men had another category. I can remember whining about that...I thought, ‘if the men get it, why shouldn’t the women?’” Likewise, Joan reflected that it was not until the mid 1990s that track and field opportunities for women became more equivalent to those of men. The Masters Athletics movement played an instrumental role in that regard. When Katherine became involved in Masters Athletics, participating athletes were seen as “just a bunch of old people over there doing their thing.” As a result, older women faced few restrictions which helped them equal or surpass their younger counterparts in many distance events. This helped reverse common gender misconceptions about older female athletes. Katherine recalled the first time she witnessed a woman running the 10,000m at a 1977 Masters track meet:

She turned up, and oh my goodness she’s a woman! And they said, ‘No. You can’t do that. You’ll get in the way of the men.’ And there was a protest... ‘She’s got her number. She’s paid. What are you going to do?’ And I was in the stands...and I watched her. And she lapped a good quarter or third of the field.

Describing the age requirements for Masters level competition (35 for women, 40 for men), Paula noted that the rationale was “to grab women and keep them in the sport.” She added, “Men were staying in...but women weren’t. They were dropping out. They’d have families. They’d put that as their first priority and they would just get away for doing anything for themselves.” For her part, Paula described how she felt empowered when she began running as a Masters athlete:

It was basically forbidden. They were to get married. They were to have kids. But to be athletic was just not on. And so they got involved later. They got involved when they were 55, 60, 65 and discovered their amazing athletic abilities. And so this was just like a rebirth for them.

Yet, the participants spoke about still encountering skepticism about their involvement in competitive running as older women. For example, Abby talked about the reactions of women in her bridge club, many of whom are in their eighties: “they can’t believe that I’m still doing this...They’ve had

hip replacements and knee replacements. And I think that's what a lot of people worry about. That you're going to cost the health system a lot of money with these injuries, which in the long run doesn't add up that way." For her part, Joan mentioned that in many of the workshops she teaches, "I'm going over hurdles and I'm doing all this stuff, and these women and men look at me and the men usually say, 'How old are you? How can you do that?'" By contrast, Paula spoke about the respect she received from her peers. "They think it's amazing and they're incredibly supportive and awed I would say...The fact that I've stepped it up another notch and compete, they think that's very cool...There's no jealousy or 'What an idiot. Act your age.'" Yet, Paula felt that "people are still blown away when they see these older athletes." She reports that a frequent misconception is "that if you're an older female then the only type of running you're doing is marathons."

Sexualization and commodification

The sport of running has shifted from being a preserve of youthful masculinity to a sport for the masses of all ages. However, despite these inroads, running remains "a markedly androcentric realm" (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 390) as new discourses emerge that sexualize and commodify the female athletic body. Media coverage of female athletes has increasingly sexualized and trivialized their sporting performances by emphasizing their appearance while the eroticization of the female body in sports such as gymnastics, beach volleyball, and figure skating invite voyeurism (Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005, p. 16-17).

Hardin et al., (2005) also note that the emphasis placed on sexuality in women's sports and fitness magazines suggest that "the goal of any fitness routine for women is purely aesthetic – to attract men" (p. 108). Hargreaves (1984) concurs by stating that the ideal type of female Olympic athlete has become the svelte and sexy glamour girl (p. 20). In running, this is epitomized by former US track athlete Mary Decker. "Little," "pretty," and "sexy," Mary Decker was frequently contrasted to "those hard-faced East Europeans with the ambiguous biceps" (Hargreaves, 1984, p. 20) while Olympic gold-medal sprinter Florence Griffith-Joyner was regularly described as "leggy," "lithe," and "gorgeous" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 162). Athletes failing to conform to the standard of desirable female athleticism continue to face "the stigma of overt masculinity" (McCrone, 1984, p. 131). In some cases, this discrimination is taken to the extreme by calling the athletes' gender into question. For example, due to their masculine appearance, Olympic runners such as South Africa's Caster Semenya and Poland's "huge and husky, deep-voiced" (Hall, 2002, p. 92) Stella Walsh have faced much scrutiny regarding their gender. In the 1960s, gender verification tests were instituted as a mandatory requirement of female athletes wishing to compete at the Olympic level. Although the context has changed, the subordination of women's sporting prowess to their sexuality remains constant (Hargreaves, 1984, p. 20).

This theme of the sexualization of the athletic female body was prevalent in the interviews. Katherine, Abby, Joan, and Paula all commented on the increased exposure of the athletic female running body in the media. Paula reports being "astounded" by the extent to which the beauty of female athletes was emphasized by the sports media: "You watch the Olympics and you think, there's not an ugly athlete out there. Not one! They are these totally perfect specimens." She reflects that while the promotion of sexiness in running was not taken to the extent of beach volleyball, "where a bikini outfit was mandated as the outfit..., there is still that manipulation of women. Yeah you're an athlete, but first of all we want you to look sexy and good out there. And maybe that's a drawing card, but yeah. It riles me." Paula furthers that as "the female sport body is becoming more and more a desirable shape...fashion-wise there is very much an acceptance and a promotion of the fit female body." When discussing running clothing, Abby admitted a dislike of the latest fashion trend of running skirts because

“you have to have a lovely figure to wear those.” Similarly, Paula highlights the subtle concessions to patriarchy that continue to be perpetuated through sport. “Everything matches now...So that’s brought women in as well as satisfying that acceptance from males that, oh yeah, they look great. Short shorts. You can’t beat it.”

This increased sexualization of the body is a concern because it might lead to the resurgence of “the stigma of overt masculinity” (McCrone, 1984, p. 131) which was once associated with female muscularity. At least one participant spoke about experiencing this stigma. Small and muscular, Joan’s appearance fit the picture of youthful muscular athleticism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. As she puts it, “I have these defined arms and this big rib cage, and of course no boobs... I could pretty much be a body builder.” Yet she mentioned one stigma, which made her realize that her physical appearance remained out of the norm in the eyes of some:

I had this mom come and see me and say, ‘can I get my husband to meet you? He doesn’t want our daughter to do sports because he thinks it’s going to make her muscular and masculine. Can I get him to come and look at you?’ ...That made me realize that there was still this perception by people that this was going to happen.

Similarly, Paula remarked, “you’re not considered weird to be in sport anymore, just as long as you don’t get too muscular. If you get too muscular then you’re pushing it a little bit.” She felt that there persists “a worry with the girls about developing too much muscle, even though you explain the physiology to them...So it’s still out there.” Joan pointed out, “look at that poor girl, Semenya. It’s not her fault she was born questionable...She’s left out there...probably by a bunch of men in their sport organization...to be fed to the wolves!”

Although discourse sexualizing the athletic body can be restrictive, Paula felt that older women often find a sense of empowerment through uncovering the previously hidden older female body. Commenting on the variety of attire in Masters athletics, Paula reports a “huge range of what the athletes will wear out there,” with apparel ranging from “the bum hugger bikini bottom shorts...to a high cut loose short” to “what would be considered some fairly skimpy outfits. And they’re loving it!” Paula feels that older women athletes “enjoy looking feminine and looking good.” She attributes this to the fact many of these women “in their earlier youth were probably not even allowed to show their shoulders, let alone be running out in public in shorts for goodness sakes!”

However, uncovering the older female body entails walking a fine line between personal empowerment and conformity to the dictates of feminine beauty. As Joan reflected, “our society has sort of told everybody to defy age. We dye our hair and we do this or that, but if you’re doing it because you’re afraid of getting old it’s sort of sad.” She added, “I must admit we’re all competitive and we do judge each other, and you see these women that look better than you at your age and you think, ‘Oh gee. How’d I let myself go that badly?’”

Conclusion

The social discourses informing women’s involvement in sport have evolved over time. Notions about women having “limited energy” and being “susceptible to strain” have been disproved by advancements in medicine and research demonstrating the positive effects of exercise on the aging body. With the rise of a healthy aging discourse, older adults are increasingly encouraged by public

health campaigns to get active rather than take it easy. With these increasingly positive definitions of aging, athleticism in later life is becoming increasingly valued (Flatten, 1991, p. 67).

Although older women have historically been socialized to abstain from engaging in strenuous sports, unprecedented participation rates in untraditional activities such as running suggests that the barriers of sexism and ageism are being eliminated (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 387). In particular, older women can be seen as having defied sexist and ageist discourses by competing so vigorously and establishing the older female body as a source of pride and joy. Nonetheless, remnants of those discourses continue to oppress, as evidenced by the stigmatization some of the athletes experienced concerning their muscularity and the ongoing issues related to the commodification and sexualization of female sports. In summary, while new freedoms for women in sports and physical activity have undeniably been gained, this research demonstrates that the discourses informing women's early participation in sport continue to operate within culture, albeit in new manifestations.

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