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CONSPIRING TO RUN

Women, their Bodies and Athletics Training

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Abstract Women's athletics commenced about 60 years after the start of the men's sport. Women's involvement in athletics was held back by the medical and general views that this was a strenuous sport requiring a level of exertion beyond the biological capabilities of female bodies. Their difficult initiation into athletics occurred under male gaze; they encountered opposition from the public, the medical profession and from the male-controlled athletics organizations. A serious participation in athletics requires significant exertion and dedicated training. While the prevailing view was that moderate physical exercise without strain enhanced women's health, the exertion required for athletics was deemed to be potentially dangerous. Within essentialist views of gender, women's involvement in athletics was thought to have implications for their nurturing and domestic roles. When the pioneer women athletes tried to excel, they were said to be straining themselves and their participation in the sport was brought into question. By using theoretical insights drawn mostly from Foucault, training manuals from the early decades of women's athletics and material from interviews with some of the first English female athletes are examined to investigate the attitudes of both genders to women in athletics and to analyse how they circumvented the potential veto of their sport by men.

Key words • body • gender • historical sociology • sports training • women's athletics

We shall never have great doings from women unless they have great souls — we cannot well expect great souls in little cramped bodies. (Fletcher, 1879: 536)

It is one of the most beautiful things I can imagine to see a group of young girls in summer happily competing with each other, full of *bon camaraderie* and *joie de vivre*. But we must ensure that from their young enthusiasm comes no ill results. (Eliott-Lynn, 1925: 115)

What the future history of women in track and field will be depends in a great measure on the attitude the women take in conducting the events within their immediate control. (Frymir, 1930: 15)

Athletics developed into a worldwide sport from its origins, in the second half of the 19th century, as an exclusive amateur sport of higher class English men. It was seen as a hard, strenuous sport that demanded much from the body and had the potential to cause strain with lasting physical and mental impairment. As practised by men, athletics was thought to involve considerably more effort than could be reasonably expected of the female body. The entry of women into

athletics implied for them bodily attributes of 'power, speed and strength' that were 'suggestive of a qualitatively new notion of womanhood' (Hargreaves, 1994: 131). The 19th-century social constructions of women's bodies were given scientific validation through the medical profession's interpretations of female anatomy and physiology (Hargreaves, 1994; Vertinsky, 1990). Medical discourse, in conceptualizing the female body 'as a complex biological machine to be controlled by appropriate scientific regimens' (Vertinsky, 1990: 3), was homologous with gendered divisions and inequalities. Accordingly, 'the idea of health and its relationship to physical activity [for women] became decisively confiscated by the doctors and the scientists' (p. 8). In the latter decades of the 19th century, some sports — such as tennis, golf, croquet, swimming and, with some dissenting voices, cycling — were considered to provide suitably gentle exercise for 'ladies' (McCrone, 1991; Parratt, 1989). But their admission into a sport as arduous as athletics was a contested and drawn-out process that required women 'to face public disapproval and even ridicule in order to assert themselves' (Leigh and Bonin, 1977: 73).

In this article, some aspects of women's entry into and participation in athletics in the 20th century are examined against a background of public opinion and medical discourse that was generally unsupportive of their involvement. A 'case study' focusing on English women athletes is presented that details some issues and processes dealt with more widely by Hargreaves (1994) and Vertinsky (1990) in their investigations of women's sport and constructions of women's bodies and physical activities. The analysis is based on athletics training texts from the close of the 19th century to the 1930s, together with interviews conducted with some pioneer English women athletes by the National Centre for Athletics Literature at the University of Birmingham, England.¹ Female athletes successfully 'grew' their sport during the 1920s and 1930s, when women's attempts to develop a presence in other supposedly arduous sports, such as soccer, failed. While athletics produced new horizons for expressions of women's physicality, the competition and training that it involved brought to the fore the whole issue of women's involvement in more strenuous sports. Accordingly, the question addressed here is: how did women regulate the nature and intensity of their involvement in athletics, thus developing their sport in the face of, at best, qualified support and, at worst, outright opposition from men and from more sceptical women? This question is explored through an investigation of the difficulties faced by women athletes in the early years of this sport and of some of the strategies that they used to circumvent negative attitudes towards their participation.

Theoretically, the analysis is informed by a Foucauldian perspective focusing on the operation of power at the 'capillaries'. With modernity, the growth of disciplinary power made the individual the focus of social control (Foucault, 1991), and the body became the site where power relations are meaningfully constituted (Andrews, 1993: 115). This individualization of control is associated with the widespread diffusion of power and its operation in ordinary day-to-day behaviour. Power is most visibly exposed and reproduced at the extremities of its action in compliance-promoting forms and technologies of body surveillance (Andrews, 1993; Butchart, 1998; Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Hall, 1996). This

involves the day-to-day surveillance of people's activities by others and, in the manner of the panopticon, by self-monitoring (Duncan, 1994). Relations of power reproducing the conditions of people's lives operate continuously in the construction of their everyday activities, but differently according to the subject's gender. The actual bodily forms against which women monitor themselves and assess other females differ from those used for male bodies. Processes of self-surveillance have encouraged women to act in ways that comply with patriarchal discourses of power: ways, moreover, that are 'normalized' by each woman assessing her own behaviour against that of others of her gender. For example, against arguments for women's equality in sport, both men and women have supported cases for the development of 'women's sport' that is qualitatively different from men's (Hall, 1996: 50–1). Hargreaves (1994: 111) suggests that '[i]deas about the female body become internalised — a part of "commonsense reality" which is difficult to challenge'.

There are many ways in which the appropriateness of a woman's behaviour can be 'examined' and judgements made about it by the subject and by others. Women's behaviour is under constant surveillance in the home and in the conduct of domestic duties, in childbirth, in illness, in health, in the workplace, in physical activity and, significantly in terms of women's sport, in the doctor's consulting room. The medical disciplines, through their capture of the right to make legitimate statements about the body, became an important mechanism of control in modern society: 'power and knowledge directly imply one another; . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault, 1991: 27). In the 19th century and well into the 20th century, women's physical activity was under constant surveillance and, at its extremes, as witnessed in sport, the knowledge governing female physicality and its disciplining effects became most visible. The outcomes of women's physical folly (or wisdom) was revealed to them in the doctor's consulting room, where diagnoses and prognoses were informed by the gendered interpretations of the body underpinning medical knowledge. In the consulting room, the physician's clinical gaze provided simultaneously the ultimate instrument of limitation over their sporting activities and a dimension of patriarchal social control. A means of realizing this 'biopower'² over women lay in limiting the forms of acceptable physical activity. Bodies are cultural products (Cox and Thompson, 2000: 6); indeed, to understand historically and socially specific somatic forms it is necessary to comprehend the discourses, knowledge and power pertinent to particular constructions of bodies. Medical discourse established the 'appropriateness' of different ways of expressing female physicality in the period under consideration: some activities, typically those involving only slight exertion, were judged to be suitable for women whereas the more strenuous ones were not. Perhaps a measure of the corporeal micro-power that restricted women's physicality was found in the view of one 19th-century medical practitioner that 'she is the doctor's best patient. More special books are written describing her ailments than are compiled for men' (Anderson, 1890: 265).

The socially accredited knowledge about the female body in terms of its workings and its capabilities was tied to the power of the medical profession

and of the biological sciences more generally. But women also contested this patriarchal, hegemonic exercise of power. While 'structures of constraint' informed and legitimated by medicalized interpretations of female bodies influenced women's sporting participation, they also exercised choice to engage in sports that pushed the limits of these restrictions (Hargreaves, 1994: 113). Although recognized in his later work, Foucault otherwise neglected the importance of agency: an omission quickly detected by feminist writers (Cole, 1993; Hall, 1996). However, agency has to be taken into account if we are to understand how the pioneer women athletes developed their sport by empowering themselves to work both against and *within* the processes of patriarchal hegemonic biopower. As Gramsci (1971) has demonstrated, hegemonic power is constituted from a complex negotiation between the power-wielders and others, in which the compliance of the latter is secured through concessions made by the former. Counter-hegemonic discourses seldom witness the overthrow of an established order, rather they challenge and nibble away at its assumed 'correctness'. This was the case for the pioneer women athletes: it constituted a triumph of human agency. Publicly, they embraced medicalized constructions about their bodies. Avoiding outright conflict with the medical profession and men more generally (including those who controlled athletics), women athletes carefully, consciously and perhaps covertly self-empowered themselves by constructing a counter-hegemonic activity that gradually established their position in this sport and opened the way to a more open expression of female physicality. The emergence of women's athletics represents an interesting fusion of apparent (and, doubtless, at times actual) complicity with patriarchal attitudes and deliberate, veiled opposition to these discourses.³ Perhaps this was a necessary strategy, given that 'no matter how determined they were and no matter how good their arguments were, women could not get very far without the support and alliance of the male sport establishment' (Leigh and Bonin, 1977: 79; also see Hargreaves, 1994: 132–3).

The Growth of Women's Athletics

Women's athletics, as distinct from the limited female involvement in professional running or in pre-modern events, seemingly originated in some American colleges in the 1890s. This was followed by the organization of women's competitions in Germany from 1904, although it was not until the 1920s that women's athletics grew rapidly and became formally controlled with the founding of national organizations and an international federation. Athletics did not figure in the sporting universe of English women until after the First World War, when the Women's Amateur Athletic Association (WAAA) enjoyed a dramatic expansion from 20 members when it was formed in 1922 to over 25,000 just three years later (Cowe, 1999; Elliott-Lynn, 1925; Frymir, 1930; Lowe and Porritt, 1929; Richardson, 1897; Shaulis, 1999; Webster, 1930).⁴ Men's clubs formed women's sections to assist the phenomenal growth of women's athletics. A foundation for women's sport was provided by the establishment of school-based physical activities for girls in the late 19th century, once the prejudices against women engaging in moderate physical activity, other than the accepted games such as

croquet and lawn tennis, had been eroded (and amid concern about national physical degeneration). Physical drills, gymnastic exercises and some sports commenced initially in higher class girls' schools, with close attention being paid to their perceived 'physical limitations' to avoid strain. These activities may have provided a base for the development of women's athletics (Dudley and Keller, 1909; James, 1898; McCrone, 1991; Thomas, 1912: 10–11). A concurrent increase in female paid employment underpinned an independence among middle class women that fostered their breaking into some sports previously considered to be male domains — a process also noted for the USA (Cahn, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994).⁵

According to Webster (1930: 28ff.) the first women's international athletics competition, staged in 1921 on the pigeon-shooting ground at Monte Carlo, did much to encourage the participation of women in the sport, with the subsequent formation of English women's athletics clubs. That a team of English women entered this competition occurred through the intervention of a London newspaper, *The Sporting Life*. Under its auspices, two men — one a 'clocker' of athletics races and boxing referee, the other the director of physical education at London's Regent Street Polytechnic — took less than two months to recruit and train a team of women from the Regent Street and the Woolwich Polytechnics. From today's perspective, it seems hardly credible that none of these women had any prior athletics experience (Cowe, 1999: 18). They did not attempt the throwing events, perhaps because of the longer time required to develop the necessary techniques, but the 17 women team managed to win about two-thirds of the events that they entered. If nothing else, this indicated the very rudimentary state of development of women's athletics.

Women entered athletics rather tentatively, gently probing their way into a male sport. Prior attempts to enter male sports, such as football, cricket and cycle racing, had floundered in the face of ridicule and outright opposition (McCrone, 1991; Simpson, 2001):

I was asked to referee the first women's football match at Crouch End. I declined, but I went to see the match and came to the conclusion that the game was not suitable for them. Someone declared that one of the players was a 'Tommy' made up as a woman. The Football Association have discouraged this invasion of the 'eternal feminine', just as they have discountenanced Sunday football. (Wall, 1935: 15)⁶

In a patriarchal culture, it was difficult for women to break away from dominant, medicalized discourses that, exercised through the everyday processes of micro-power, 'wrote' their bodies as physically weaker and more highly strung, more 'nervous' than men's. In practice, the ascribed social positions of women informed the biological constructions of their bodies and the parameters of their legitimate physical activities (Pfister, 1990; Vertinsky, 1990). Moreover, it was accepted that physical strain incurred a drain on the nerves and, if women were to 'overdo' things, physically or mentally, it would lead to them not being able to complete the duties associated with their gender.⁷ This perspective clearly influenced the deliberations of the medical subcommission of the Olympic Congress on the participation of women in sport, which, on 1 June 1925, resolved the following findings:

1. The special functions in life of Woman make it necessary that she should not do anything to injure her special organization.
2. Her Sports must be carefully chosen and only those suitable for women can be proposed for training and competition.
3. The conditions for women in competition and practice must be reduced considerably from those arranged for men.
4. Medical tests are absolutely necessary both before, and periodically during training.
5. Those Sports not fit for women must be cut out. Boxing, wrestling and Rugby. The majority of the Commission are against football.
6. Clothing regulations are very necessary and must be made by each Nation to prevent regrettable exhibitions. (In Elliott-Lynn 1925: 122)

The new century carried over perspectives on female body culture from the preceding decades. Exercise for women was not ruled out, its significance and importance was recognized in the late 19th century ('Art', 1859?; Crawley, 1870s?; Fletcher, 1879; Galbraith, 1895; Hargreaves, 1994; James, 1898; Pearson, 1885; Richardson, 1897; Rippon Seymour, 1898). But this recognition was accompanied by a continuing tension between the recognized benefits of moderate exercise, the forms in which it was gained, and the dangers of 'overdoing-it' on women's physical and mental well-being. The concern and the advice was directed mostly at women from the higher social classes, with the labours of working class women largely overlooked. The balance between valuable exercise and over-exertion was perceived to be a delicate one, with too much causing physiological and neurological damage. Motherhood figured prominently in the advice given for women to exercise within their abilities: a fit woman made a better mother, but a physically strained woman stood to experience all kinds of mothering problems. Women, as mothers, bore the responsibility of ensuring not just their own health but also that of the ensuing generations (Pearson, 1885: 70–1), which was viewed with considerable importance in a time of widespread fears about national physical degeneration (Cahn, 1994; Searle, 1971). The suggestion that women were responsible through their individual actions for the well-being of their unborn children was a profoundly potent implementation of prescriptive micro-power over female body culture. Whereas the unborn could gain from their mothers' 'reasonable enjoyment of physical exercise and recreation', strain and 'the aping [by women] of what is masculine' was cautioned against (Warre, 1884: 89).

Right from the start of organized women's athletics, the issues of a hegemonic male gaze and the devaluation of their sport were at the forefront of their participation. Lucille Hill (1903: 4), the director of physical education at Wellesley College, noting that women's determination to participate in athletics was equal to the opposition to it, nevertheless stated, 'our watchword should be "Moderation"'. She continued that the hostility to women's athletics could be countered by conducting their athletics 'on such a high plane of intelligence and control that there can be no ground for this disfavor' (pp. 4–5). In prescribing finite limits for women's exercise that normalized gendered levels of exertion, Hill claimed that the guiding principle for women's athletics was health of body and mind, rather than performance. Training — which she claimed was 'right living' — was to be directed towards the lifelong accomplishment of good health; sport was an inducement to make habitual the practices of suitable physical exer-

cise and 'hygienic habits of living' (p. 14). A woman doing more than this faced censure for engaging in activities that may harm and, by implication, endanger their execution of the 'duties' ascribed to their gender.

Anna Galbraith (1895: 45–7, 65ff.), an American medical practitioner, subscribed to the 19th-century medical orthodoxy that the body had a finite quantity of energy: over-exertion could deplete this and result in invalidism and even insanity. Irritability, exhaustion, melancholia and a wide range of physical and behavioural symptoms were attributed to this physically induced 'cerebral anaemia' or neuralgia (p. 274).⁸ Nevertheless, she argued that women reject the view of themselves as 'weak' and seek a good physique through moderate exercise done at a sensible intensity and directed at the development of the whole body — again advice that normalized an appropriate female body culture. A further theme was the benefit of training for women's mental and moral qualities, given their reputedly temperamental, nervous disposition (Barker, 1903; Herrick, 1902a, 1902b, 1903; Hotton, 1903; Webster, 1930). Herrick (1902b), in stereotyping her gender as emotional and impulsive, claimed that through athletics women could modify impetuous behaviour, replacing it with more balanced, reasoned perspectives. Galbraith (1895: 103) provided a physiological explanation for the mental benefits of training by explaining that physical movements also exercised the brain and nervous system. Hill (1903: 13) suggested an ethical value of athletics for women in that it created 'submission to strict discipline . . . unquestioning obedience . . . perfect control of the temper and sensitiveness under coaching [and to] . . . be absolutely unselfish'. But Hill does not address the question of to whom these qualities should be directed? For women to be submissive, obedient, controlled and unselfish in a patriarchal society demonstrates an operation of micro-power at the 'extremities'.

As the 20th century dawned, women were advised to exercise well within their physical capacity: advice that constrained their participation in athletics for decades. The purpose of athletics for them was not to show the limits of what women could achieve in acts of individual record-breaking brilliance, but to create an all-round physical development, producing the good health and vigour that was associated with mental and moral benefits and normalized women's physicality to a female quantum (Herrick, 1903; O'Hagan, 1900). It was suggested that women direct their attention to attaining 'grace in form' (Hotton, 1903: 179), although such perspectives were also influenced by gendered constructions of skeletal differences between men and women. Rather patronizingly, Hotton (1903: 181) attributed the 'unpicturesque waddle' of the beginning female athlete to women's natural physique. But this was a perspective on women reiterated by women: in the caption to a photograph accompanying her article, Herrick (1902b: 719) noted that, '[e]ven the most graceful non-athletic woman runs awkwardly: she does not run, indeed: she waddles. Therefore running is the most beneficial of all athletic things a girl can do. It gives her grace of movement, endurance, and strength.'

Against a background of a grudging, qualified acceptance by men of a female body culture, women's athletics grew from virtually nothing to a thriving, well-supported sport during the 1920s, albeit one characterized by a restrained physicality. As women's athletics became formalized in the 1920s, the caution

concerning the intensity of their participation was restated. The American Physical Education Association established an aim 'to accomplish a safeguard for the health of the individual competitor in track and field events' (Frymir, 1930: 13). Moreover, the women's division of the American National Amateur Athletic Federation resolved in 1929 to oppose female competition in the Olympic Games, to avoid the 'specialised training of a few', the exploitation of women and the possibility of their being subjected to strain when in preparation for competition (Frymir, 1930: 13).

Women's athletics remained subject to men's approbation: its growth was restricted by the ways that medical discourses informed male gaze and underpinned the micro-power shaping the female body. The 'concern' about women's athletics centred on the effects that strain was thought to have on females and possibly on their yet-to-be-born children — the 19th-century arguments about women's exercise were restated. Accordingly, women athletes proposed a prudent approach for themselves and, for the public gaze at least, embraced accepted perspectives on gendered differences. '[W]omen are primarily designated as mothers, and the opportunities must never be given for harm to happen', for that would produce 'far-reaching consequences in the future', showing up in childbirth, wrote Sophie Elliott-Lynn (1925: 18) in one of the first publications on athletics by a British woman who, at the time, was the Vice-President of the WAAA.⁹ Careful evaluation of the effects of exertion was considered to be necessary in case athletics proved to be detrimental to childbirth and women were advised against competing when menstruating for fear of damaging the uterus (Frymir, 1930: 22; Lowe and Porritt, 1929: 312). Possibly women subscribed to the prevailing medicalized perspectives on their bodies and were as concerned about the effects that athletics might have on their health as they were about guarding their sport against attacks from men.

[W]hen I had a baby, my first baby, I had to fill in . . . a form to say what sort of confinement I'd had, how long it lasted and everything about it . . . For the women's three As in London. They were so very careful about as to whether it was going to damage women or not. (NCAL¹⁰ interview with Winifred Hayward (nee Easter), 17 Feb. 1988, p. 12)

Lowe and Porritt (1929: 312–13) stressed that exercise was of benefit to women *provided* that it was done in moderation and avoided strain. As a 16-year-old in 1931 Mary French joined the 'ladies' section of the Birchfield Harriers in Birmingham. She attended the training sessions held on Tuesdays and Thursdays and competed on Saturdays. The weekday training sessions were general affairs in which they practised a wide range of track and jumping events. She noted that,

Women's athletics at that time . . . was at an experimental stage especially middle distance and cross-country. The rule book was full of things we could not do relating to age, distances we could run and how we dressed for running. We had few friends amongst the male athletes and officials, who thought women incapable of strenuous exercise. Women athletes had a lot to prove and our own women's three As officials moved very cautiously. We were advised never to look too distressed after a race. (NCAL interview with Mary Bartleet (nee French), 17 May 1989, p. 6)

Muriel Gunn, who was born in 1906, joined the Mitcham Athletic Club in the London suburbs and had very little coaching other than for some starting prac-

tice.¹¹ The renowned 19th-century athlete, W.G. George, lived near to her training ground and he used to proffer some advice, but Muriel added that ‘there was no official coach’ (NCAL interview with Muriel Cornell (nee Gunn), 6 Dec. 1988, p. 18). Muriel favoured the long jump about which ‘nobody knew anything’ (p. 18). She then spent some time training under F.A.M. Webster, a leading coach and prolific writer on athletics, but, she claimed, ‘after two or three years he said, “Well, nothing I can teach you.” He said, “you can’t improve on the perfect”’ (p. 20). Vera Searle, born in 1901, was the leading woman 440 yards runner of the early–mid 1920s, even though she did not start her track career until 1923 and she stopped competing after her marriage in 1926 at her husband’s insistence. Vera broke the record for the 440 yards in her first year of competition, but subsequently treated her achievement rather dismissively, ‘I mean we used to break records every time we ran in those days’ (NCAL interview with Vera Searle, 7 June 1989, tape 1: 4). She trained from Easter until September; nothing was done over the winter months.¹² The early women athletes seem to have had very little coaching and much of what they did came from watching and copying the men.

[T]he days I was running there wasn’t any such thing as coaching [for women] . . . We never warmed up. We used to run round before the meeting started because we’d seen the men do that . . . your event might have been three quarters of the way through the programme and you warmed up before the meeting started . . . I can only think that those of us who did take it up in those early days, it was something new and if you knew you were nippy on your feet, well, it was a good thing to do. (NCAL interview with Vera Searle, 7 June 1989, tape 1: 2–3, 27)

This pointed to a construction of women’s athletics as a ‘semi-serious’ activity, in which they were left very much to their own devices in developing approaches to the sport that normalized their participation in terms of a level of physicality considered appropriate to their gender. In keeping women on the margins, male athletes constituted a channel of power serving to reproduce in the sport the gendered inequalities found in other social spheres.

Even a decade or so later, coaching of women athletes was relatively rare. Dorothy Tyler, also a member of the Mitcham Athletic Club, was a high jumper but she did not have a coach as such until she was in her late 20s: ‘[W]hen I was first in athletics there were just club coaches and nobody really bothered about you very much even if you were good’ (NCAL interview with Dorothy Tyler, 16 Jan. 1981, p. 4). Moreover, she had two children before competing in the 1948 Olympic Games and then was just coming back into athletics, ‘I was told I could join a session at Mottsbrough Park if I liked . . . That was my training for the ‘48 Olympics . . . Casual’ (p. 4). Her lack of a specialist coach was reflected in her not using a measured run-up and in employing the scissors jump¹³ at these games (p. 13). Two decades before, Webster (1930: 65) had described the scissors jump as old-fashioned, although it was the style of high jump exclusively used by women, ‘there being a prevalent impression that it would be harmful to a girl to attempt to master the hip-twist, which is an essential attribute of the “turn and lay out” style’. Discounting this critique of women using the western roll technique, Webster predicted a significant increase in the women’s high jump record once

they had adopted it in preference to the scissors jump (p. 253). Following the 1948 Olympics, Dorothy Tyler teamed up with a coach, Arthur Gold, who taught her to jump using the western roll (NCAL interview with Dorothy Tyler, 16 Jan. 1981, p. 26) and extended her competition into other events, claiming that 'It wasn't till after the '48 Games that I realized I could do other events because I'd never been *allowed* to do them' (p. 9; emphasis added). Dorothy's acquisition of the western roll technique for the high jump and her comment about being allowed to do more events points to two things: first, that constructions of female body culture were being widened to include activities previously thought to be inappropriate for their gender but that, second, the limits that were placed on women's physicality remained forms of male determined micro-power.

Many authors of athletics training manuals simply ignored the presence of women in the sport, but others began to take note, often a very brief note, of female participation. Generally, this participation was held to be a good thing, but an important proviso was invariably added: women must ensure that their competition and training remained of moderate intensity. This advice constituted a normalization of physical activities, which constructed a quantum constraining athletic women to defined limits of physical exertion. The training advice given to women replicated and reproduced the gendered inequalities of a patriarchal society. Given that women entered athletics considerably later than men, it was considered appropriate for them 'to learn from and copy style and methods [from men] . . . but it will always be with the idea of approaching perfection at *their own* relative standard' (Lowe and Porritt, 1929: 308; original emphasis). Contemporary writers scotched any suggestion that women could achieve equality with male athletes, remaining 'but a pale shadow of man . . . the advancement of women in athletics [is] a thing entirely disassociated from the achievements of the male sex' (Abrahams, 1926: 112), a point that was supported by women writers (Frymir, 1930: 19).

The constructions placed on women's anatomy and physiology meant that any attempt by them to seek physical parity with men was folly that could cause lasting harm. The fear of such harm, fuelled and legitimated by medical knowledge, to them and possibly to their unborn children, meant that women athletes did not seek to match men's physical accomplishments. Women's submissiveness in sport was homologous with gendered power relations in other spheres of life, therefore. In short, women's athletics was 'domesticated'. Although women athletes made rapid advances in the 1920s, it was argued that their lower physical capacity meant that this could not be sustained. In comparison with men, women had 'shorter, less muscular legs, more adipose tissue, a small heart and smaller lung capacity, fewer corpuscles in the blood' (Abrahams and Abrahams, 1928: 15). Women's fewer corpuscles meant that 'her blood . . . supplies relatively less of the vitalising oxygen which is essential for the production of energy in the muscles' (Lowe and Porritt, 1929: 310). The result was the view that women had less speed and 'less ability for arduous muscular work' than men (Abrahams and Abrahams, 1928: 15).

In the Best Form: Training without Straining

Ideas about strain from 19th-century physiological theories filtered into the early decades of the 20th century (Hargreaves, 1994) and were encapsulated in the view that neither body nor mind should be overtaxed. It was then understood that the over-exerted muscle or nerve never regained its original condition, remaining in the stressed state; and women, because their higher body temperature entailed a higher rate of energy use, were believed to reach this point of strain sooner than men (Lowe and Porritt, 1929; Richardson, 1897; Webster, 1930). Medical examinations before and during training, and, owing to the 'excitable' nature of women, when in competition, were recommended for the female athlete (Webster, 1930). Winifred Hayward was a member of the Birchfield Harriers, where Miss Nelson, a significant figure in the development of women's athletics was to become the club's first woman coach.¹⁴ Nelson, Winifred reported, trod carefully in her promotion of women's athletics.

... when they [women] started to do cross-country the young ones she [Nelson] would have them all examined. And the doctor came down and he examined them all after the race, before the race and after the race ... but these were the younger ones ... That was really to see whether it was dangerous for them to do anything like that. And everything has always been very seriously thought about. (NCAL interview with Winifred Hayward (nee Easter), 17 Feb. 1988, pp. 10–11)

Women were strongly advised not to exert themselves to the point of being strained. The supposedly 'safe' sports included activities that could be done without too much damage, but a question mark hung over the advisability of women's participation in the supposedly more vigorous athletics. The physical benefits of exercise for women, from an improved blood-flow and better musculature to the stimulation of bodily excretions, were widely recognized, provided that they did not induce through strain molecular changes that may have affected them as potential mothers (Abrahams and Abrahams, 1928; Lowe and Porritt, 1929; Thomas, 1912). The 'more sensitive nervous organisation' of women meant that 'severe competition leads to a nervous tension with far-reaching permanent results' (Abrahams and Abrahams, 1928: 16). Further to this, Lowe and Porritt (1929: 310) argued that women had more active 'glands of internal secretion', which occasioned 'a higher output of nervous energy and, consequently, a relatively smaller production of physical energy'. So, if women exercised too vigorously, especially under the nervousness of competitive sport, 'an over-activity of bodily functions' (p. 312) could result in neurasthenia and perhaps cause a condition known as 'athlete's heart', which was believed to involve a potentially fatal, irreversible dilatation of the heart.¹⁵

Training, according to Webster (1930: 258), consisted of appropriate exercise, rest, sleep and food 'to bring the athlete to such a condition as will enable her to produce her best effort on the day of competition'. The fine dividing line between the exercised, healthy body and the problems associated with doing 'too much' was reached considerably sooner by women than by men, however. Training was also intended to gradually develop bodily strength, eliminate excess tissue and waste products, and develop a 'reserve force', the latter being 'the

ability of the heart to increase its efficiency' (Frymir, 1930: 18, 23–4). The health risk lay in continuing to exercise once the reserve force had been depleted. In this way, medical and scientific knowledge, by setting the acceptable level of physical exertion for women at a lower point than for men, was used as an instrument of micro-power.

Women were advised to gradually build up the intensity of their training. A clearly stated theme in the earlier years of women's athletics was that of low intensity exercise, of not becoming tired, and of taking care that the type of activity did not impair their reproductive capacities. 'Too much of running', Elliott-Lynn (1925: 28) claimed, 'tends to solidify certain ligaments and parts that are meant for easy elasticity in childbirth'. The low intensity of training recommended in the 1920s and 1930s contrasts markedly with the work done by present-day women athletes. Frymir (1930: 49) suggested that 10 to 15 minutes 'of actual jumping, starting, and striding is sufficient for one day'; this activity developing stamina, health, vigour and the 'form' required to compete in athletic events. In the opening years of women's athletics, this slender degree of activity minimized the risk of any distress being displayed to the critical appraisal of a hegemonic male gaze. Ironically, this low intensity training may have increased the chance of a woman becoming distressed in competition, because she was under prepared for the task.

Frymir (1930: 34) noted that the difference between sprinting and a natural ability to run quickly lay in the former being a 'cultivated mechanical form' — in other words, training provided the difference between athletics and simply running, jumping or throwing. In contrast to the women's team that competed at the international meet in Monte Carlo in 1921, by the end of the 1920s training had become a serious matter for British female athletes (Webster, 1930: v). Even so, Williams (1934: 98) suggested that a few weeks of specialist athletics training prior to competition was sufficient when done on a base of regular year-round activity. But this specialist training, Williams continued, should not be done more than three times a week and never on consecutive days. Webster (1930: 2–4), on the other hand, advised women to avoid strain by training for a short time each day rather than for longer periods two or three times a week, and that they should remain under medical scrutiny.

Form, speed and endurance come together in track athletics. While the established training practices designed to inculcate these characteristics in male athletes provided exemplars on which female training was modelled, issues arose which could not be readily resolved by reference to men's practices. How should a woman prepare for the 1000 metres, for example? This distance did not appear in male competitions, so there were no training schedules on which women could model their preparation. To get around this issue, Webster (1930: 151) advised women to adopt the principles used by men for running the mile. But Webster's comments came with a caution: that in preparation for longer distances it is better for women not to do enough work than to do too much — advice that surely increased the risk of women becoming distressed when competing in these longer races. He claimed that women's highly strung nature carried with it the danger that when they came into training they were eager to test the limits of their abilities: 'If she does so she will inevitably go stale. Her real object should be to

store up all the exuberance of fitness she can against the demands of the race day' (p. 153). Despite Webster's advocacy of women's athletics, he emphasized the need for moderation.

Lowe (1935: 6–7) also supported women's athletics, subject to 'certain limitations', which included the restriction of their events to 'those which are really suitable for their physique'. So long-distance races were out of the question because of the 'manifest limitations' of female bodies, a point that Lowe claimed was recognized by the women's athletics organizations in their avoidance of the more strenuous events. By no means did the consensus of opinion suggest that the physique and physiological functioning of women bar them from athletics. Rather, women's participation was interpreted in terms of their attempts 'to reach a definite female standard of excellence' (Lowe and Porritt, 1929: 310). Limits, set mostly by men, who constrained and controlled female involvement in the sport, were legitimated by medical opinion.

Certainly, women athletes were aware of the supposed 'dangers' of physical exertion. Elliott-Lynn's (1925: p. x) enthusiasm for women's athletics carried the proviso that it was done 'under medical and technical supervision'. The WAAA's moulding of this sport to their gender took into account prevailing attitudes about female bodies, the supposed effects of physical exertion on them and the moral propriety of their participation.

[T]he shorts were down to the knees . . . And a loose tunic which was worn outside the shorts and you couldn't tuck them in 'cos that was immoral . . . I can only describe the kit as showing no sign of the wearer's form underneath at all. All loose. (NCAL interview with Vera Searle, 7 June 1989, tape 1: 5)

Among the objectives of the WAAA were, 'the ensurance [sic] that women should compete only in suitable surroundings and desirable conditions', and that women should be given 'advice as to the choice of suitable events for competition and also as to training' (Webster, 1930: 33–4). Webster's (1930) support for women's athletics was patronizing, with men allowing and setting the boundaries of their participation: 'Time and close observation alone will prove what distance a woman can run without risk of lasting injury to her complex make-up' (p. 6).

In the formative years of women's athletics, competition was confined to the shorter track races and less gruelling field events. The earliest years of American women's track athletics was restricted to sprints, mostly of 100 yards (91 metres) or less, although some colleges ran a 220 yards (201 metres) event (Herrick, 1903: 324). During the 1920s and 1930s, the WAAA, for English domestic competitions, and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) for international meetings, restricted women's races to 1000 metres, because 'above that distance would tend towards strain and distress' (Elliott-Lynn, 1925: xii). Male writers supported and stressed this restriction. Lowe (1935: 72), for instance, noted that races in excess of 1000 metres were 'scarcely suitable for women on either physical or aesthetic grounds'. Lowe and Porritt (1929: 313–14) added that it was wise to restrict women 'to those field events', such as the high and long jumps, 'where style and technique rather than strength are the important factors'. Webster (1930) supported restrictions on women's competition and advised that their sprints should be limited to 220 yards. However, he added that women

should run the quarter mile (402 metres) in the same way that men ran a half mile: that is, as a middle distance rather than as a sprint race.¹⁶ He also opined that the 1000 metres was the female equivalent of the men's 1500 metres or mile races, which roughly equates with Elliott-Lynn's (1925: 31, 112) formula that physically women could do about three-quarters of that done by men.¹⁷ Women's athletics, she added, had to resolve a middle ground between avoiding activities causing strain and therefore 'wholly unsuitable for the feminine organism', while embracing those sufficiently 'energetic to assist the woman towards the most healthy development she may attain' (p. 112).

The FSFI scrubbed out races between 200 and 800 metres. The early international meets for women featured the sprints up to 200 metres for the quick runner, the middle-distance events of 800 and 1000 metres for those with endurance rather than raw speed, together with hurdling and some jumping and throwing events. Despite these measures, seemingly designed to accommodate their sport to men's hegemonic gaze and their control of peak sporting organizations, women running the longer distances met with considerable opposition. Vera Searle pointed out that women athletes had to tread a careful path in the formative years of their sport. '[T]he women's three As had . . . all the medical profession against them when they started, and so that made them always err on the side of caution' (NCAL interview with Vera Searle, 7 June 1989, tape 1: 24). Although she claimed that she was never distressed at the end of a race, even when running a heavy schedule of events at inter-club meets, Vera mentioned an innovative solution of women to the problem of hegemonic male gaze if one of their number was troubled by her run.

[T]hey did have one or two foreign girls collapse after an 800 metres and of course all the press rushed round and took photographs of her lying on the ground . . . [therefore] if we had anything like that we used to gather round and stop the press getting a view of it. (tape 1: 25)

The extent to which women athletes accepted the medicalized, male views of their bodies is not entirely clear. It is quite possible that women realized a need to work strategically within the demands of patriarchal strictures if they wished to develop their participation in athletics. The author of 'Track' (1923: 7–8) highlighted some of the difficulties faced during the early years of organized women's athletics in noting that an injury to a male athlete may go unnoticed, whereas one suffered by a woman could lead to calls for the abolition of their sport, the opponents of women's athletics basing 'their conclusions upon the physical unfitness of the participants to stand up under the so-called violent sports'.

A way in which women could accommodate restrictions on the intensity of their involvement in athletics, while still making a contribution to the sport, lay in the development of 'form'. Form, an important feature in all track and field competition, refers to the most efficient way of doing an event. At the turn of the century, Herrick (1902b) suggested that women developed 'grace' from moderate exercise; additionally, the development of form was believed to have a beneficial impact on women's deportment.¹⁸ Webster (1930: 94) gave poor form, which came from a 'lack of proper coaching', as the reason for British women's poor record in field events. Mastery of form is essential in the shot put: 'a girl who is skilful and has developed the ability to knit all her actions together will

always beat the big, strong girl who handles the shot as a novice' (Webster, 1930: 222–3). During the 1920s, form remained largely copied from that developed by men for their athletics competitions. Male writers tended to treat this imitation in an essentialist way, stating that women are innate stylists, giving attention to detail that allowed them to acquire form quicker than men — a feature of women's athletics that was said to have underpinned its remarkably rapid development in the 1920s (Abrahams, 1926; Lowe and Porritt, 1929). A focus on form was claimed to enable women to 'retain their femininity, which is one of the world's assets' (Lowe, 1935: 8).

Frymir (1930: 26–7) made use of differences between male and female physiques to argue a case for more investigation into the forms most suited to women's athletics, rather than simply adapting male forms to their competition. She continued that for women, good form should minimize effort, eliminate unnecessary movements, reduce the risk of injury and develop an aesthetic smoothness pleasing to the observer (pp. 27–8).

Grace, agility, and accuracy of movement should be as great a motivating force as the attainment of speed in the running events, of distance in the throwing and jumping events. More competition in form and less competition of the more strenuous type would be a far greater benefit to the majority of girls and women if a standardised form were adopted for the various events. A rating scale, such is used to judge form in the standard dives, would give impetus to form competition. (Frymir, 1930: 28)

Frymir (1930: 205) continued that women should take full control of their physical activities because they were more in tune with the 'emotional and psychological nature' of their gender. Frymir's advocacy of form and female control may have been used subtly to advantage the medical and masculinist hegemonic restraints on women's physicality. If followed through, Frymir's recommendations would have involved the designing of athletic events specifically for women, which would be judged by women in a sport controlled by them. Had this been adopted, it would have removed women's athletics from the hegemonic gaze of men while, at the same time, conforming to (or, at least, appearing to conform to) physiological thinking about the effects of strenuous exercise on female bodies.

Conclusion

The low-intensity, relatively low-frequency training and, by present measures, mediocre performances of the pioneer women athletes was informed by physiological theories that over-exertion could promote severe, even life-threatening health problems. Women were thought to experience strain sooner than men and so were advised to exercise less and compete conservatively. Accordingly, the entry of women into what were considered to be strenuous male sports was widely opposed on the grounds that the budding participants would become strained, endangering not only their own well-being, but also that of the next generation. While women successfully gained a place in athletics, their attempts to break into other sports failed, begging the question of how women managed to sustain a presence in this sport and not in others? It is argued here that the credit for

this advance lay very much with the pioneer women athletes, first, because of the way that they managed their participation in athletics in terms of the medical and scientific discourses of the period and, second, with their subtle negotiation of patriarchal interpretations of female physicality.

Medical, scientific and gender discourses intermeshed, constituting a virtual panopticon that impeded women's entry into strenuous sports. Women's physicality was normalized into low-intensity activities that were believed to improve overall well-being and provide positive health benefits without incurring the spectre of strain. The power embedded in medical knowledge worked its influence, capillary-like, through the checks placed on female physicality, which were also internalized by many women in their constructions of what they believed was appropriate, normal behaviour for their gender. The forms of micro-power and the associated male hegemonic gaze constraining women's activities could not be swept away in a tidal flow of female physical culture — if nothing else, this was prevented by the complicity of many women in the disempowerment of their gender. Women's attempts to secure a foothold in overtly physical sports such as soccer perhaps were doomed to failure because they directly confronted male hegemony with all its medico-scientific backing, rather than working with it.

The pioneer women athletes were successful, where their sisters attempting to break into other sports failed, because, avoiding open confrontation, they nibbled away at the extremities of the micro-power repressing their physicality. So these women exercised relatively gently, were ever prepared to undergo medical examination to provide 'objective' evidence that their exertions had not damaged them, promoted 'form' as an equal of performance and restricted their competition to events considered to be within female capabilities. By adopting such strategies women cemented a place in athletics when they failed to do so in many other sports. Certainly seeking medical approval for their activities kowtowed to masculinist hegemony, but it also constituted evidence that could not be discounted by the sceptics or outright opponents of women's athletics. While it took several more decades to finally put to rest the myth of female physical frailty, the pioneer women athletes, in using the instruments of patriarchal micro-power to blunt its effects, gradually affirmed their place in this sport.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the University of Birmingham Library for allowing me access to the transcripts of these interviews. The athletics training texts were sighted in a number of libraries, particularly the British Library and the Bodleian Library, and through the sterling work of the interlibrary loan service at Deakin University. I thank the staff at all of these libraries for their courteous and supportive help. This research was conducted as a part of a larger study on the origins and development of modern sports training techniques, which was assisted by an Australian Research Council grant. An earlier version of this article was read to the International Sociological Association World Congress/International Sport Sociology Association (RC27), Brisbane, Australia, July 2002. I thank the anonymous reviewers and journal editor for their constructive comments. As ever, I am indebted to my colleagues Marnie Haig-Muir and Roy Hay for their productive critiques and support of my work.
2. 'Biopower' refers to the implementation of prescriptive forms of body use as an integral part of surveillance procedures.

3. Hargreaves (1994: 91) notes that, 'Women's sports are invested with meanings which are imposed on women, but which women also create for themselves'.
4. The involvement of some English girls' private schools in athletics in the late 19th century noted by Cowe (1999: 5), does not seem to have been of any significance in the subsequent development of women's athletics.
5. The increased responsibilities of women in the First World War may have quickened their entry into more arduous sports, but it seems unlikely that women's athletics would have taken off so dramatically without the school-based development of a female physical culture and the relative independence gained from a place in the workforce.
6. My thanks to Roy Hay for bringing this observation to my attention.
7. The possible effects of 'strain', as understood by the physiological models of the period, placed limitations on physical activity for men as well as for women (Mewett, 2002).
8. An association between physical activity and mental capabilities had a wide currency in the latter decades of the 19th century, with a popular appreciation that the development of the physique also kept the brain in good condition (Fletcher, 1879; Pearson, 1885; Richardson, 1897; Warwick, 1998).
9. An indication of male 'supervision' of the early years of women's athletics is found in Lord Decies as the first president of the WAAA. The same was also the case for the Swedish Women's Athletics Association. Its president, Dr Einar Lilie, 'proved himself the keenest Swedish advocate of games for girls' (Webster, 1930: 61). The first women's sport clubs in France were headed by men (Leigh and Bonin, 1977: 75).
10. National Centre for Athletics Literature, University of Birmingham, England. Mainly during the 1970s and 1980s, NCAL conducted a series of interviews with British athletes. Interviews were conducted with some of the surviving English women athletes from the interwar years.
11. Muriel trained on a cinder track, which was unusual because, as Vera Searle noted, women had only four cinder tracks to run on in those days, all in the London area — elsewhere they had to run on grass (NCAL interview with Vera Searle, 7 June 1989, tape 2: 1).
12. An apparent difference between the British and the American approaches to training is found in the advice given from the start of the century: 'The girl who aspires to figure as a sprinter works all winter in the gymnasium' (Herrick, 1903: 325).
13. By this time, leading high jumpers were using the 'western roll', the technique that caused Babe Didrikson to be disqualified from the 1932 Olympics high jump, but which was permitted by a subsequent change in the rules (Layden, 1997: 58). As late as the 1950s, the scissors jump was still being taught at the Methodist Ladies College, a major private school in Melbourne, Australia (personal communication from Marnie Haig-Muir).
14. A member of the Birchfield Harriers in the post-Second World War years, Diane Charles was trained by the then Mrs Nelson-Neale, describing her as a 'fantastic person. She was a good excellent coach and she took me in hand' (NCAL interview with Diane Charles (nee Nether), 19 June 1988, p. 3).
15. In an extension of this logic, Lowe and Porritt (1929: 314) noted that a highly strung woman was unlikely to gain any significant benefit from athletics because 'the good she gets from any physical improvement is dispersed by the nervous strain resulting from her neurasthenic mental make-up'. See Wharton (1992) for a discussion of 'athlete's heart'. The researches of Deutsch and Kauf (1927) on the effects on the heart of participating in different sports provides an example of how scientized medical research could be used to justify restrictions and limitations on exercise intensity.
16. The quarter mile, or 400 metres as it now is, is commonly considered to be the longest of the sprint distances. The distinction between aerobic and anaerobic activities had not been made by that time.
17. Elliott-Lynn (1925: 44) noted that women participating in cross-country runs during the winter (a period when training as such was suspended) should treat them as 'friendly spins' — definitely not as races — from which an increased endurance would be attained for the ensuing season's athletics. She did point to the French practice of women's cross-country races from which no ill effects had been reported, however. Her explanation for this was that the women's pace in these races was relatively sedate and that they competed only towards the end of the season, when they

had developed a good condition (pp. 59–60). The distance of these French races was only 2.8 kilometres!

18. Dryden (1903) pointed to the significance of sports for women in the development of a body shape and carriage suited to the fashions of the early 20th century.

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