FEMALE ATHLETES AND THE ATHLETIC SYSTEM

Janice Roberts-Wilbur, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Boston University
Overseas Counseling Program

and

Michael P. Wilbur, Ed.D.
Professor
Boston University
Overseas Counseling Program

and

Joseph R. Morris, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Western Michigan University

Abstract

This article discusses the difficulty that many female athletes have in making the athletic transition from high school to college athletics. Specific factors that affect the degree of difficulty that female athletes experience as they make the athletic transition, along with information about the rules and expectations of the athletic system and common mistakes that female athletes make, are presented to provide readers with information that may facilitate their ability to identify and understand female athletes who are particularly ineffective in negotiating the athletic transition.

Female Athletes and The Athletic System

Much has been written about the femininity/masculinity of female athletes (Harris, 1987; Hoferek & Hanick, 1985), the sex role identity of the female athlete (Colker & Widom, 1980; DelRey & Sheppard, 1981, Duguin, 1978; Edwards, Gordin & Henschen, 1984; Helmreich & Spence, 1977; Henschen, Edwards & Mathinos, 1982), how female athletes compare to male athletes and nonathletes (Bredemeier, 1985; Hyde, 1984; Jackson & Marsch, 1986; Murray, 1983; Williams, 1978), and the role-conflict of female athletes (Anthrop & Allison, 1983; DelRey, 1978; Felshin, 1974; Gilbert & Williamson, 1973; Loggia, 1973) Others (Hoch, 1972; Kane, 1982; Lever, 1976, 1978) have suggested that sport is perhaps the critical means by which adolescents learn and maintain the roles and values of our society and point to the restricted involvement in complex sports and games as, in part, responsibile for women's limited effectiveness in organizational problem solving as adults. However, little attention has been directed towards providing female athletes with the information and/or direction that will assist them to function effectively in the masculine domain of athletics. Consequently, many female athletes pay an emotional price for their athletic involvement (Cratty, 1983), and they do not understand that by competing in athletics they have an opportunity to learn skills that they can later apply in organizational settings. Instead they are often referred to as "head cases". They are described as having more emotional problems than male athletes, as not taking their sport seriously, as not being able to play with pain, as not being good team players, and in general, as being less coachable.

Many female athletes enter college unprepared for the athletic experience. Like male athletes they often erroneously assume that college will be a continuation of their athletic experience in high school (Roberts-Wilbur, Wilbur, & Morris, 1987). While some female athletes have difficulty making the academic transition, they appear to have more difficulty making the athletic transition than they do the academic one. This may change as women's sports programs begin to gain more recognition, and probably varies between sports and between institutions but in general more male athletes seem to be in trouble academically than female athletes. Therefore, the focus of this article will be on the athletic transition of female athletes and not the academic one. The purpose of this article is to discuss the athletic transition from the female athlete's perspective and to provide information that can be utilized to assist female athletes in making the athletic transition.

Many women (because they compete in a context of cultural mores, prejudices, expectations, and social sanctions) feel compelled to choose between being feminine and being athletic, and fear that they will become masculinized as a result of their athletic participation (Hill-Donitsch, 1986;

Harris, 1987). Also, a majority of female athletes today are first-generation college athletes and thus have no maternal role models. Consequently, they enter the predominately masculine athletic system unaware of the larger system with its rules and expectations. Because sport is a masculine domain and a socializer for men, female athletes need to learn how to function effectively in the predominately masculine athletic system, in addition to improving their athletic skills. In other words, the athletic transition is more difficult for women because they must learn how to function in the athletic system and at the same time compete in it whereas male athletes have been socialized to function in the athletic system and therefore need only to compete. Thus, female athletes need to be given information about the differences between professional systems and personal systems (relationships), about the rules they will be expected to follow, and about some of the common mistakes that female athletes make.

Most female athletes will experience some difficulty in making the athletic transition. The type of sport has been found to be an important factor in determining the social acceptability of female athletes (Cratty, 1983). Those sports that emphasize strength, bodily contact, and endurance have traditionally been thought to detract from femininity while sports emphasizing skill, grace, and beauty have been thought to enhance femininity (Malumphy, 1968; Snyder, Kivlin, & Spreitzer, 1975). Thus, one would expect female athletes who compete in the less acceptable sports such as basketball, track, and softball to have a more difficult time making the athletic transition. Besides the type of sport the degree of difficulty that female athletes experience can depend on such things as: 1) their attitudes, values and beliefs about women; 2) their high school athletic experience; 3) the amount of over-protection and/or pampering at home; 4) their orientation toward play; and 5) their expectations of being treated differently because they happen to be female.

The Athletic Transition

Successful women athletes are described as being assertive, dominant, self-sufficient, independent, intelligent, aggressive, reserved, and high achievers (Harris, 1987; Williams, 1980). While female athletes are not necessarily strong advocates of women's rights, by virtue of their athletic participation they will be expected to behave in nontraditional "unfeminine" ways. Because the athletic demands, in terms of time, are so much greater in college than they are in high school, female athletes find themselves spending more and more of their time engaging in nontraditional (unfeminine) behaviors. Harris (1975) reported that female athletes experience dissonance between their social selves and their competitive selves—that women often pecseive their athletic role to be separate from, and to some degree inconsistent with, their social selves. This coupled with

the double standard of behavior that requires female athletes to act like ladies but perform like men, often results in female athletes experiencing more dissonance between their social selves and their competitive selves in college than they did in high school. Consequently, female athletes who hold traditional attitudes towards women (and therefore themselves) can be expected to have a more difficult time making the athletic transition, because the traditional social expectations of women in our society differ from what will be required of them in their sport.

Their high school athletic experience also will affect their ability to negotiate the athletic transition. it is therefore important to determine how their high school experience is similar to and/or different from their experience in college. Such factors as "start status", relationships with the coach, fan support, and competitiveness of the program are all important variables to investigate.

Women who have been over-protected and/or pampered at home can also be expected to have a more difficult time making the athletic transition. Female athletes accustomed to being "daddies' little girls" often find the physical and time demands of their sport as unrealistic.

Female athletes are often criticized for not being serious enough about their sport. Kane (1982) describes women as having a play orienttion toward games (more concerned with fairness than victory), whereas men have a more professionalized attitude toward play (stressing skill and victory over fairness). Females are encouraged to be less competitive and less motivated to win in sports and to be more concerned with the personal, self-expressive rewards of performance (Kidd & Woodman, 1975; Loy, 1975). Initially many female athletes do seem to be more concerned with fairness than they are with victory, and it is not uncommon for them to describe their athletic participation as something that they have done and/or do for fun. Female athletes who have a play orientation toward their athletic participation will find the college emphasis on skill development and winning alien, and they will be frustrated when others (i.e. coaches) expect their sport to be the most important thing in their lives.

Finally, many female athletes enter college having been treated differently (special) because they happen to be female. Female athletes are often treated like "girls" rather than athletes. If this has been the case (either at home or in their high school programs), when these women are finally treated as athletes, they will tend to feel as if they are being treated unfairly.

The Athletic System

The athletic domain is an example of a professional system similar to other corporate systems in our society. Women are taught how to behave in personal systems (relationships), but they are not taught how to function and behave in professional systems. This causes a problem for many female athletes because they approach their sport, and the larger athletic system, in the same way that they approach personal relationships. Thus it is not uncommon for female athletes to personalize criticism, to focus more on fairness than winning, and to attempt to have their emotional needs met through their sport. Therefore, it is important to provide female athletes with specific information about professional systems (the athletic domain) so that they will better understand what is expected of them and will behave in ways that will not reduce their credibility as serious athletes.

Female athletes need to understand that professional systems are basically task-oriented, and that the task of the athletic system is to win. The focus in the athletic domain is extrapersonal. That is, the task of winning provides a common purpose for the team, team effort is paramount, group and individual needs are expected to be subjugated to the task (winning), the end (winning) justifies the means, self and sport are the center of focus, and criticism is utilized to improve performance. More specifically, female athletes need to know that in the athletic domain feelings are irrelevant, individual group member relationships are not important, individualism is perceived negatively, personal problems are not disclosed, players are expected to be able to handle criticism without getting upset by it, and affectional, closeness and/or intimacy needs are not addressed.

It is often assumed that female athletes, like male athletes, understand the rules (what is expected of them and what behavior is appropriate) of the athletic system by virtue of their athletic participation. This is not the case for many female athletes. Many female athletes do not realize that the athletic domain is a professional system, independent, if you will, of their athletic participation and, consequently, they do not understand what is expected of them and/or what behaviors are considered appropriate. Female athletes need to know that they have **not** been socialized to know and/to follow the rules of the athletic domain. They also need to know the rules of the athletic system and to follow these rules, if they are to be successful college athletes. The following information related to rules is not intended to be inclusive but rather, it represents our most typical and frequent observations and experiences with female athletes.

Winning is the Name of the Game

Many female athletes simply do not understand this basic rule. They may think that it is desirable to win, but many female athletes do not

understand that this rule underlines the existence and therefore the purpose of everything that goes on in the athletic system. This is due to the fact that: 1) females are encouraged to be less competitive and less motivated to win in sports and to be more concerned with the personal, self-expressive rewards of performance (Loy, 1975); 2) female participation in the world of sport is relatively new; 3) level of sport involvement has been found to be directly related to professionalization of attitude toward play Kane, 1982); 4) women have less positive feelings about successful women and their own success (Horner, 1970; Weinberg, Gould, & Jackson, 1979; Wittig, 1975; Silva, 1981); and 5) women anxious, or at least uncomfortable, in male-oriented achievement situations.

The results is that female athletes simply are not as concerned about winning as male athletes. Female athletes need to recognize theimportance that winning plays in the athletic system, regardless of their own personal beliefs about the importance of winning. They also need to realize that unless they behave as if winning is the most important thing to them, others (coaches, trainers, teammates, etc.) will not see them as being competitive, motivated or serious athletes. Female athletes who do not understand that **winning is the name of the game** will behave inappropriately, i.e., they will be more concerned about whether or not they played or started, than they are about winning, they will not understand why they are being pushed so hard in practice, and they will see the athletic system as cold and ruthless and their coaches as indifferent.

The Focus in the Athletic System is Extrapersonal

The focus is not centered on team members but instead is on the task of winning. It is this focus on the task of winning that provides a common purpose for the team. Individual member needs of an interpersonal or intrapersonal nature are subjugated as the team's objective to move towards the goal of winning. Thus, the athletic system is not concerned with individual group-member relationships, attitudes, or feelings, but it is focused on winning. Female s are socialized to focus more on relationships than they are on winning and in fact have been found to quit a game when a dispute threatens a friendship rather than to risk losing the relationship (Lever, 1975, 1976). Female athletes who do not understand that the focus of the athletic system is extrapersonal make the mistake of focusing more on relationships with teammates and coaches and on their own personal concerns than they do on the task of winning. In particular, they do not understand that feelings are irrelevant. They do not understand that coaches are not interested in how they feel or what they think about what is expected—coaches expect them to do what they are told to do regardless of how they feel and/or what they think.

Team Effort is Paramount

Females have not had as much experience playing on teams as males. Consequently, female athletes seem to have a more difficult time subjugating their personal needs to those of the team and instead attempt to function at either the interpersonal and/or intrapersonal level. Examples include manipulation for one's own personal gain, personalization of feedback, indirect expression of anger, talking about players and coaches behind their backs, starting rumors about teammates, not putting-out in practice, and holding petty grievances against teammates and coaches. In other words, many female athletes are more concerned about themselves than they are the team. Female athletes also seem to be less knowledgeable about some of the team concepts than male athletes. Many do not understand such things as—you need the team to be a star, how the team performs is more important than the performance of individuals, you are part of the team regardless of whether or not you participate in a competition, and etc. This inability of some female athletes to function as effective team members seems to be related to their focus on fairness as opposed to winning. They are so concerned about who gets what, who the coaches like best, who gets criticized the most, and who said what to whom that they lose sight of how their behavior negatively affects the overall team performance. We have worked with some teams whose members spend more energy and time in petty disagreements and disputes with one another than they do preparing to meet their competition. It is as if they forget that they are on the same team and instead behave as if they are on opposing teams.

Criticism is Utilized to Improve Performance

Female athletes seem to have a particularly difficult time dealing with criticism. They tend to personalize feedback and respond to criticism by acting hurt. This, more than any of the other things we have discussed, seems to be particularly aggravating to coaches. Women are brought up to please others and therefore they do not perform so much for themselves as they do for others, e.g., coaches. Therefore many female athletes appear to be hurt when their coaches are critical of them, and react to the criticism by crying, getting angry, and sometimes quitting the team altogether. One of the reasons that female athletes respond to criticism the way that they do to criticism is that they do not understand that they need to separate the professional parts of their lives from the personal parts of their lives. They need to understand that what a coach says to them during practice does not have anything to do with how the coach sees them as a person and, likewise, how a coach treats them out of practice does not have anything to do with their position on the team. In other words, many female athletes think that if a coach likes them that they will get to start, play, and travel, and that if a coach is critical of them, the coach does not like them. Female athletes need

to understand that they are involved in a performance competition, not a popularity contest.

It also is important to emphasize that females are socialized to believe that the direct expression of anger and/or aggressiveness is not feminine, i.e., "be nice to everyone" or "good girls don't get angry". Therefore, many female athletes, even though they are aggressive when they compete, feel uncomfortable directly expressing anger to another person. Women seem to feel more comfortable expressng hurt than they do anger and therefore often cover their anger with hurt or **act hurt** when they are angry (Goleman, 1988). They also have been socialized to express their anger indirectly and this explains much of the **talking about others behind their backs** syndrome that is commonplace on women's teams. It is extremely important that female athletes learn to accept criticism without letting it upset them, if they are able to do this, they will experience an unnecessary amount of emotional pain and will not receive the feedback that they need in order to improve their athletic skills. Women who play for coaches that expect them to **act like ladies but perform like men,** or threat them differently because they are females, will have a particularly difficult time coming to terms with this aspect of the athletic system.

Self and Sport is the Center of Focus

The relationship that athletes have with their sports is supposed to be the center of focus or their lives. Males athletes who cannot define themselves independent of their sport are examples of this rule. Female athletes tend to see their sport as **part** of what they do and who they are, but not their lives. They also tend to value their relationships with others as much as, if not more, than they do the relationship that they have with their sport. Because all of their lives are not tied up with their sport, they are unwilling to do some of the self-destructive things that male athletes are willing to do to their bodies, and they are more likely to quit their sport altogether if they decide that their situation is not making them happy, or if their sport is interfering too much with other parts of their lives. Female athletes, unlike male athletes, are in the position of needing to define themselves independent of their sport in order to feel feminine. Men can use their athletic participation to reinforce their masculinity, whereas women, by virtue of their athletic participation are thought to be unfeminine or even gay. Thus, female athletes resist narrowing their focus to their sport because to do so would threaten their identify as women.

Conclusions

While female athletes may not understand the rules and expectations of the athletic system as well as male athletes, it is remarkable in some respects

that so many female athletes have functioned and continue to function as well as they do. Female athletes are required to spend as much time as male athletes in their sports for much less reinforcement, to undergo surgery just like male athletes, to participate without the illusion of a lucrative professional athletic career, and to deal with their sexuality being a public issue. We would argue that female athletes are closer to being real student-athletes because they do not have more emotion problems than male athletes, they do not create as many embarrasing situations for athletic departments and programs as male athletes, and they have healthier self-concepts than many male athletes who identify completely with their sport.

Based on the socialization of women, it is understandable that female athletes would have and will continue to have a difficult time negotiating the athletic transition, just as many male athletes continue to have a difficult time negotiating the academic transition. It is important to realize that many female athletes do not know what is expected of them in the athletic realm anymore than many male athletes understand what they need to do in order to be successful academically (Roberts-Wilbur, & Wilbur, 1986). Therefore, it is a mistake to make the assumption that female athletes know what is expected of them and/or to label them **head** cases when they behave inappropriately in the athletic system. To do so results in criticizing female athletes for something that they have not been socialized to know or, in effect, criticizing them for behaving the way that others have socialized them to behave.

We are not suggesting that all female athletes are unprepared to play the **athletic game** but to the degree that they are unprepared for their athletic experience, they will frustrate coaches and other athletic personnel, behave in ways that will reduce their athletic credibility, and pay an unnecessary emotional price for their athletic involvement.

It is not enough simply to provide women with the opportunity to compete. The opportunity, if it is to be a real one, must go beyond recruitment and take into consideration that fact that, with information and direction, many female athletes (regardless of their athletic ability and/or potential) will not be prepared to take advantage of the opportunity. Perhaps even more importantly, female athletes will not understand that by virtue of their athletic participation they have a real opportunity to learn about professional systems and develop skills that they can apply later in organizational settings. This opportunity needs to be emphasized and highlighted rather than glossed over and ignored because what female athletes learn by virtue of their athletic participation has the potential to go beyond what happens to them on the sportfield.

Finally, it is important to reframe the perceptions that others may have about the inappropriate behaviors manifested by many female athletes. If

we, and others, understand that the inappropriate behaviors of female athletes may be related to their ignorance of the rules and expectations of the athletic system, perhaps we also will be in a position to develop the support programs and systems to facilitate their ability to understand and function appropriately in the athletic system. Such as understanding is the first step in enhancing female athletes' athletic performance.

References

Anthrop, J., & Allison, M. T. (1983). Role conflict and the high school female athlete. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 54, 104-111.

Bredemeier, B. J. (1985). Moral reasoning and the perceived legitimacy of intentionally injurious sport acts. Journal of Sport Psychology, 7, 110-124.

Colker, R., & Widom, C. S. (1980). Correlated of female athletic participation: Masculinity, femininity, self-esteem and attitudes toward women. Sex Roles, 6, 47-58.

Cratty, B. J. (1983). Psychology in contemporary sports (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

DelRey, P., & Sheppard, S. (1981). Relationship for psychological androgyny in female athletes to self-esteem. International Journal of Sport Psychology, 12, 165-175.

Duguin, M. E., (1978). The androgynous advantage. In C. A. Oglesby (ed.), Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality (pp. 89-106). Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger.

Edwards, S. W., Gordin, R. D., & Henschen, K. P. (1984). Sex-role orientations of female NCAA championship gymnasts. Perceptual and Motor skills, 58, 625-626.

Felshin, J. (1974). The dialectic of woman and sport. In E. W. Gerber, J. Felshin, P. Berlin, & W. Wyrick (eds.), The American Woman in Sport, Reading, MASS: Addison-Wesley.

Gilbert, B., & Williamson, N. (1973, May 28). Sport is unfair to women. Sports Illustrated, p. 88.

Goleman, D. (1988, September 12). Feelings. The Stars and Stripes, 14-15.

Harris, D. V. (1979). Psychosocial considerations. Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 10, 32-36.

Helmreich, R., & Spence, J. T. (1977). Sex roles and achievement. In D. M. Landers & R. W. Christine (eds.), Psychology of Motor Behavior and Sport (Vol. 11).

Henschen, K. P., Edwards, S. W., & Mathinos, L. (1982). Achievement motivation and sex-role orientations of high school female track and field athletes versus nonathletes. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 55, 183-187.

Hill-Donitsch, K. (1986). Chemical use and the woman athlete. CWS News, Winter, 14, 1-2.

Hoch, P. (1971). Rip Off the Big Game, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Hoferek, M., & Hanick P. (1985). Woman and athlete: Toward role consistency. Sex Roles, 12, 687-695.

Horner, M. (1970). Femininity and successful achievement: A basic inconsistency. In J. M. Barwick, Feminine Personality and Conflict Chapter 3). Belmont, CA: Brooks Cole.

Hyde, J. (1984). How large are gender differences in aggression? A developmental meta-analysis. Developmental Psychology, 20, 722-736.

Jackson, S., & Marsch, H. (1986), Athletic or antisocial? The female sport experience. Journal of Sport Psychology, 8, 198-211.

Kane, M. J., (1982). The influence of level of sport participation and sex-role orientation of female professionalization of attitudes toward play. Journal of Sport, 290-211.

Lever, J. (1976). Sex differences in the games children play. Social Problems, 23, 478-487.

Lever, J. (1978). Sex differences in the complexity of children's play and games. American Sociological Review, 43, 471-483.

Loggia, M. (1973, July). On the playing fields of history. MS Magazine, p. 62.

Loy (1975). The Professionalization of Attiude Toward Play as a Function of Selected Social Identities and Level of Sport Participation. Paper presented at the International Seminar on Play in Physical Education and Sport, Wingate Institute, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Malumphy, T. M. (1968). Personality of women athletes in intercollegiate competition. Research Quarterly, 39, 610-620.

Murray, J. R. (1983). Effects of alone and audience on motor performance for males and females. International Journal of Sports Psychology, 14, 92-97.

Roberts-Wilbur, J., & Wilbur, M. (1986). The academic game. Academic Athletic Journal, Spring, 31-34.

Roberts-Wilbur, J., Wilbur, M., & Morris, J. R. (1987). The freshman athlete's transition: Athletic and academic stressors. Academic Athletic Journal, Spring, 23-33.

Silva, J. M. (1981). An Evalutation of Fear of Success in Female and Male Athletes and Non-Athletes, Unpublished paper, Brackport State University of New York.

Snyder, E. E., Kivlin, J. E., & Spreitzer, E. E. The female athlete: An analysis of objective and subjective role conflict. In D. M. Landers (ed.), Psychology of Sport and Motor Behavior, University Park: Penn State University Press.

Weinberg, R., Gould, D., & Jackson A. (1979). Expectations and performance: An empirical test of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Journal of Sport Psychology, 1, 321-331.

Williams, J. (1980). Personality characteristics of successful female athletes. In W. F. Straub (ed.), Sport Psychology: An analysis of Athletic Behavior, Ithaca, NY: Human Movement.

Wittig, A. E. (1975). Attitudes toward females in sport. In D. M. Landers, D. V. Harris, & R. W. Christina, Psychology of Sport and Motor Behavior, Penn State HPER series.