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HIST 30617

Final Essay

12.5.2019

A Cultural Crisis in Women’s Running: from Switzer to Cain

We tend to think of history as a linear narrative of progress. Specified turning points signal important shifts in culture that all align with some collective, agreed-upon final destination. After these turning points occur, the assumption is that everyone and everything smoothly falls in line with this new narrative. However, we know that nothing is ever that simple, and history is far more complicated than that.

A particularly timely example of this can be seen in the field of elite women’s running, which acts as a microcosm for women’s athletics in general. For years, the sexist and scientifically inaccurate assumption was that women were physiologically incapable of running a marathon. The underlying implication, therefore, was that a woman’s body was inferior to a man’s. However, with Kathrine Switzer’s successful and well-publicized Boston Marathon debut in 1967, this argument was undeniably disproven. In a linear story of progress, we would see Switzer’s run as a turning point and assume that the aftermath of this historic run would be a tale of female athletic empowerment. I argue that this is not the case. While women have won nominal victories in the arena of elite female athletics—running in particular—the underlying attitudes toward these athletes and their bodies has not changed much. With elite female athleticism becoming more mainstream, more studies and research has been done on the effects of exercise on the female body. When this was revealed to have possibly detrimental effects on women’s health (e.g. the female athlete triad), it was not taken as a sign to reevaluate the way female athletes were being trained. Instead, it was held up not only as a reason for why women shouldn’t compete at that level, but also as further evidence that women were physiologically inferior to men. The problem is one that extends beyond the elite female runners discussed in this essay; it is a larger reflection of gender relations in the United States, indicative of the presence of a dangerous cycle that will continue to affect future generations unless we change the culture now.

In today’s society of athleisure and Instagram fitness influencers, it’s hard to imagine that only a few decades ago the idea of female athleticism was a largely foreign concept. Antiquated, often anecdotal notions of the inferiority and frailty of the female body were still held up as fact and used as rationale for keeping women out of elite competition. For example, the collapse of a few untrained female competitors after the 800m run in the 1928 Olympics kept women from running more than 1500m until the 1970s (Vecsey). This is the culture that Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to officially run the famed Boston Marathon, grew up in. Even without female role models to aspire to, she developed a passion for running, and almost by accident began training with the men’s cross country team in college. At the time, she recalled,

“Almost all sports were for men; women rarely participated.  Most people assumed that women could not run the marathon distance and if they tried they would hurt themselves…Many people also believed that difficult sports made women masculine,” (Switzer).

After proving to herself and her coach that she could run the distance in practice, Switzer, her coach, and her boyfriend registered for the 1967 Boston Marathon.

Before Switzer, Roberta Gibb had been the only other woman to unofficially run Boston the year before. Gibb, who’d trained for the race in nurse’s shoes since women’s running shoes weren’t available, had resorted to hiding in a bush before the start of the marathon in order to avoid detection (Renich et al). On the morning of April 19, 1967, Switzer’s disguise was more subtle in the form of baggy, form-hiding grey sweats and the gender-neutral “K.V. Switzer” on her bib. It was only two miles into the marathon that race officials attacked her and attempted to rip off her bib because of her gender. However, her coach, boyfriend, and fellow runners came to her defense, and Switzer was able to successfully complete the marathon.

Prior to Switzer’s historic run, there were many barriers excluding women from competitive running. In some cases, these took the form of overt bans, such as the Amateur Athletic Union’s rule against women competing in events of more than one mile (*The Geneva Times*). This rule resulted in Switzer’s subsequent disqualification from the race and expulsion from the AAU. In most cases, however, the barriers to women’s participation were more implicit. The cultural attitude toward female athletes at the time was incredibly negative and belittling, and by and large kept women from competing for fear of being seen as unfeminine. It was often widely believed that the frail composition of the female body rendered them incapable of serious competition, despite scientific evidence to the contrary (Verbrugge). This condescending attitude is embodied in the same citation Switzer received from the AAU following her Boston Marathon debut, in which she was “chided for running without a chaperone” (Furlong*)*. Distance running is an inherently isolating sport, but pioneering athletes like Switzer and Gibb had an even more solitary experience given the lack of social acceptance. In one newspaper article’s coverage of Switzer in 1973, the reporter wrote, “Jealous spectators jeering her as she passes keep Kathrine Switzer from being lonely as a long distance runner” (*The Geneva Times*). The social stigma kept women from seeking out athletic opportunities, and this “lack of interest” was in turn used as justification for not offering said opportunities.

In a typical turning point narrative, Switzer’s run would be the event that would set progress in motion. With her lipstick, pearls, and bright smile, Switzer’s appearance was classically feminine, and the widely-published photos of her mid-race attack helped associate competitive running with femininity in the minds of Americans. With this race, she also dispelled any myths surrounding the delicacy of female composition, proving that with adequate training women are just as up to the challenge of a marathon as their male counterparts. Thanks to the efforts of the feminist movement happening concurrently with the groundbreaking runs by Gibb, Switzer, and others, the landmark Title IX legislation was passed in 1972. Title IX “prohibits discrimination against girls and women in federally-funded education, including in athletics programs” (*Gender Equality in Athletics and Sports*). In addition, within 20 years of her historic race, women went from being barred from competing in events longer than 1500 meters to the first women’s Olympic Marathon in the summer of 1984 (Vecsey).

Undoubtedly, these are all important and groundbreaking wins for gender equality in American sports, running in particular. However, I argue that in a large part, these wins were nominal in the sense that the culture of running and athletic competition in American did not change nearly enough to accommodate the new population of athletes. Women were allowed into the previously all-male world of competition, which had been designed by males for males. A strict dividing line was drawn in terms of competition between the two sexes, but the differences between the two were not taken into account in the culture and ideology of the sport.

The clearest manifestation of this fact is the continued anxiety over the female body and exercise that persists to this day, long after Switzer’s landmark run. As female athleticism became normalized and more and more women began to take part in sports, more research was able to be done on the effects of intense exercise on the female body. This research particularly emphasized the effects of exercise on women’s reproductive systems. In the 1980s and 1990s, “the number of articles about athletic amenorrhea was more than four times that of all previously published papers” (Verbrugge). In 1997, the American College of Medical Science published their report describing the female athlete triad, or RED-S Syndrome:

“a syndrome occurring in physically active girls and women. Its interrelated components are disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis. Pressure placed on young women to achieve or maintain unrealistically low body weight underlies development of the Triad” (Otis et al).

This trade-off between female athleticism and reproductive ability was seen as an inevitable consequence of female athleticism. While women were no longer shamed for running in and of itself, they now faced shame in the form of having to choose between running and procreation. We see this reflected in articles published at the time, such as one entitled, ‘Babies or Barbells: Make Your Choice’ (“Biomedicine”).

What this reveals is how different conclusions were drawn from this research on the health effects of intense exercise for women than would be for men. This new research only produced anxiety about whether or not women should compete, given the health consequences. The inherent double standard between men and women is glaringly apparent with this perspective. After all, “the prevalence of injuries among professional football players does not lead Americans to view the male body as too fragile for the sport, nor to insist that men stop playing the game” (Verbrugge). Instead of coming to the conclusion that the way women train for elite competition needs to be rethought given the effects of the current methods, the implication is that women simply aren’t able to compete as successfully at that level as men.

A clear example of the effects of this culture can have comes in the form of former distance running phenom Mary Cain and her recent allegations against Nike. Cain was a record-breaking superstar throughout her high school years, and was just 17 when she made the world championship team. Often dubbed the “Fastest Girl in America”, she was set up to have a fantastically successful professional career when she joined the Nike Oregon Program—and then she didn’t. Her professional career was short-lived and uneventful, and she left the Oregon Program in 2016. In late 2019, Cain spoke out about the abrupt end to her running career, citing a “systemic crisis in women’s sports” as the underlying cause for her professional flop (Cain). In an interview with *The New York Times*, Cain said, “I got caught in a system designed by and for men that destroys the bodies of young girls.” Under the often-abusive and misguided tutelage of an all-male coaching staff, Cain became a textbook example of the RED-S/female athlete triad first reported on in the ‘90s, which ultimately killed her professional running career.

Clearly, hers is not the case of someone who just isn’t cut out for competition at that level. Her record-breaking high school and early collegiate career are evidence enough of this. What this is indicative of is a culture that forces women’s bodies, which are clearly physiologically different than men’s, to adhere to the same training programs. The female athlete triad’s pervasiveness among female athletes—Cain is only the most recent and famous example—is a consequence of flawed logic, not a failure of female athleticism. Until this difference is understood and reckoned with, female bodies will continue to be implicitly viewed as inferior to men’s, a perspective not that far removed from the one Switzer faced leading up to her 1967 Boston Marathon debut.

Another powerful contemporary voice on this cultural issue in women’s athletics comes from another acclaimed female runner named Lauren Fleshman. In response to Cain’s allegations, she published an article with *The New York Times* regarding her experience within the culture of women’s athletics. Fleshman acknowledges the pressure put on female runners regarding their bodies, and credits her success and avoidance of the dreaded triad because of the way she adjusted her training and mentality based on her physiology. Fleshman writes,

“The natural improvement curve of young women generally includes a performance dip or plateau as the body adjusts to the changes of adolescence. If you make it past the dip, you are rewarded with steadier improvement through your mid-20s and 30s. During this normal plateau, though, girls train in a system that holds up the more linear, male performance curve as the ideal,” (Fleshman).

This is ultimately what brought about the downfall of Cain’s professional career. She was held to a linear male performance curve for her training and competition, and it ultimately came at the cost of her health. It was not inherent physical inferiority that kept her from performing her best, but a culture that is not nearly as inclusive of females as it appears on the surface. This is the change that still needs to happen in the world of women’s sports and running in particular. As Fleshman concludes in her article, “Until we acknowledge and respect that the female performance curve is different from the male version that sports was built on, girls will continue to face institutionalized harm” (Fleshman). The anxiety spurred on about female athleticism in the late ‘80s and ‘90s can be assuaged by redesigning the world of women’s sports with women in mind, instead of just forcing them into the established male molds.

What all of this goes to show is that there is much work to be done in terms of gender equality in American sports, running in particular. Though Kathrine Switzer’s historic 1967 Boston Marathon run set in motion many important events that brought about nominal wins for gender equality—such as the passage Title IX, the normalization of female athleticism, and the inclusion of the women’s marathon in the 1984 Summer Olympics—the culture of the sport remained male-dominated and male-oriented, which has resulted in many of the problems we see to this day. The prime example of this is the way in which anxiety over the consequences of intense exercise on the female body, the effects of which we see in contemporary athletes like Mary Cain, has led to an understood inferiority of female bodies as opposed to a reconfiguring of the way women train.

In the end, this is not just a problem for elite female runners. It is a mentality that extends beyond marathons to the way women in general view their bodies, and the culture in which girls grow up in. Embracing this cultural crisis as a chance to rethink existing systems and question the status quo is a quintessentially American endeavor, one that has the potential to be just as groundbreaking as Switzer’s historic Boston marathon run.

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