

Olympic Retrospective

Equality of opportunity not yet a reality

By MARGO GEE and LISA TIMPF

Suzy Truly National is a young girl from a small town in Nova Scotia who decides one day that she wants to become involved in athletics.

After visiting the local recreation centre, Suzy and her mother decide that it is beyond the family's financial means to register Suzy in any sports other than track and field and soccer.

So Suzy, who would have preferred to be a figure skater or an equestrian, joins the local track and field club. Suzy does not have designer sweatsuits like some of the other kids, but despite this, she eventually becomes age-group champion in the province in the 1500 metres.

Suzy, by now, has developed a desire to excel at the national, and perhaps international, levels. Unfortunately, she is now faced with a major obstacle. Due to a lack of competition in her event in the Maritimes, she has to leave home and family and move to Ontario. It is the only way she will achieve the recognition she needs to make the national team.

We could go on with Suzy's saga, but the point has been made.

Although sport appears, and at times claims, to be open and accessible to all, there are, in reality, many barriers confronting those who wish to participate at both the mass participation and elite levels. Problems such as regional disparity in availability of facilities, coaching or programs, social class barriers, and sex-related inequalities are only a few of the hurdles the aspiring elite athlete might have to overcome.

Maritime athletes have, in the past, and often with just cause, felt that they were unfairly overlooked in national team selections. They are not alone; athletes in western Canadian provinces also feel that many of the Ontario-based national programs favour home province athletes.

On one hand, it is understandable that a national coach who is confronted with a choice between two equally-talented athletes, one he is acquainted with and one from another province, will select the one he knows best. But the problem causes one to wonder whether our national programs are, in all cases, structured in a way which promotes truly national representation.

The Canada Games were initiated in 1969 to promote sport for Canadian youth. Yet the Games themselves illustrate other inequality areas.

On one hand, the Games seem to successfully promote sport for upper- and middle-class individuals. That was the indication of a study of participants' social backgrounds done by Canadian sport sociologists. However, sport as an activity accessible to lower income groups is not yet a social reality.

The Canada Games illustrates a second area of inequality, related to women in sport. The Summer Games, for example, offers 15 events for men and only ten for women.

Although national agencies such as Sport Canada and Fitness and Amateur Sport offer programs which are intended to help overcome some of the sex-based inequalities of opportunity in Canada, the problem persists at the international level.

Not only are there fewer Olympic events for women, but some of those which have been recently added, such as the women's marathon, have come only after a determined lobbying effort.

Once an athlete reaches the international level of competition, a whole new set of inequalities may arise. Consider first cross-national differences in training systems.

Our neighbours south of the border employ a university scholarship system for athletics, providing financial support to many "amateurs". In Canada, some schools now do offer sport-based scholarships, but the magnitude of these does not approach that of American schools. The Carded Athlete system offered by the federal government provides financial assistance to athletes, but only those who have achieved a specified level in international competition.

In Europe, athletes attend sport schools from a young age. This allows for access to top-level coaching, equipment and facilities without interruption in the athlete's academic career. In the Eastern bloc and some Third World countries, athletes are given jobs in the police or military in order to train full-time in their sport.

Sport sciences play a prominent role in international competition. Exercise physiology, biomechanics, and sports medicine are all supported to differing extents in various countries. Their importance to world-beating performances is vital. Compare the advantages of Eastern bloc countries who share knowledge and resources in this area to smaller nations lacking in both.

This leads to the question of use of drugs for enhancing sport performance. Inequalities between those who use drugs and those who do not are well documented. Although elaborate control devices have been set up for international events, testing is random. And those involved in sport always seem to be one step ahead of the drug control game.

The super-power struggle is highlighted in the Olympics and the world of international sport. Both the Soviet Union and the United States conduct technical exchanges with certain developing countries, namely those which are politically aligned. Those who are not receive very little, if anything, in the way of sport expertise from the super-powers.

During competition, several sports in the Olympic family involve judging. Not only artistic events such as gymnastics, diving and figure skating are scored in this way, but also combative sports like boxing and wrestling. Often, it would appear that judges are less influenced by sport performance than by the nationality of the athlete

Other examples could be given of inequality of opportunity in sport, both at the national and international levels. Some of the international-level inequalities are a reflection of different philosophies in different countries. Some of the national inequalities are the result of inequalities inherent in the Canadian social system.

The crucial point is that we should be aware of the problems

and avoid making the claim that sport truly is open to all and that competition takes place on an equal footing.

At the present, it seems that some athletes are more "equal" than others. □

With acknowledgements to Wayne Simpson and the Olympic Academy of Canada.

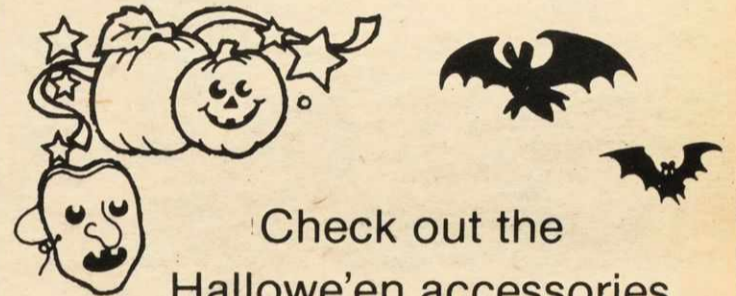
Athletes of the week

MEN: DARREN COSSAR, A third year Arts student and goaltender on the Tiger men's hockey team is Dalhousie's male Athlete of the Week for October 8-14th. Cossar was outstanding in Dalhousie's third annual Lobster Pot Hockey Tournament and was selected the tournament's All-Star goaltender. Cossar blocked over 40 shots in the Tigers' 6-4 win over St. F. X. and shut out the Mount Allison Mounties for over one-half of the contest

in the Tigers' 9-3 victory in the consolation game.

WOMEN: CLAUDETTE LEVY, a fourth year Physical Education student and goalkeeper on the Dalhousie women's field hockey team, is Dal's female Athlete of the Week for the week of October 8-14th. Levy, a native of Halifax, recorded two shut-outs on the weekend to bring her year's total to seven shut-outs in ten games.

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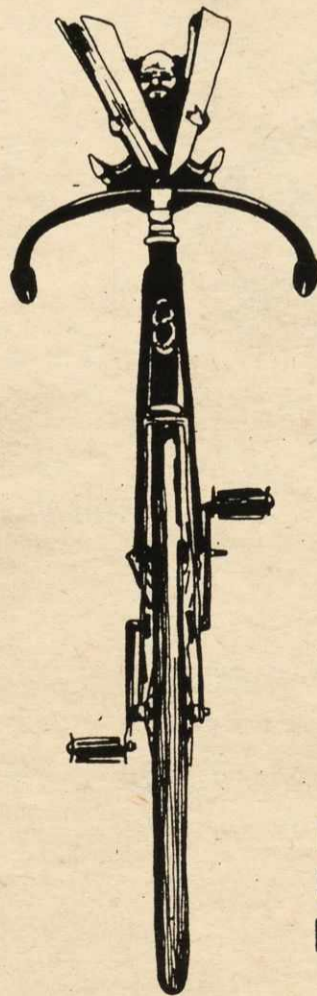
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