

BY ELISSA FREEMAN

Jock talk revisited

Writing this guest column as an *Excalibur* alumna evokes several memories and fond recollections. With the exception of new carpet and electric typewriters replacing the good ol' Olivetti standards, the *Excal* offices still look and feel the same as in the early '80s. Some things just never change. Looking back at an old *Excalibur* issue (April 3, 1983), I came across my initial "end of the year" column. I wrote, "... my first foray into the wonderful world of (sports) journalism has been, to say the least, a learning experience. People often ask me, citing the fact that I am a member of the female gender, why I write about sports?" Today, as media relations and sports information officer at York, I still hear that familiar refrain, "Gee, you sure know a lot about sports . . . for a woman."

Since I began my sports-oriented career, I have noticed several trends involving women in sport—more particularly women in the sports media. For the most part, women have successfully made a dent into this secular "old boy network," but they have had to pay the price. For every serious and dedicated woman sportscaster/journalist, there exists a male-based stereotype that women are still trying to overcome: "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, with not much between the ears."

Bruce Dowbiggin, sportscaster for CBLT's Newshour, expresses this widely-held opinion. "Hiring a woman sportscaster is the same as a man hiring a pretty secretary, only to have a woman around the sports room is prettier than having a plant in the corner of the set."

But what has perpetuated this opinion? Obviously, the powers that be at various television stations have hired pretty women to simply regurgitate the sports news—the accent, of course, on beauty instead of brains. This attitude stems from the division of male-female roles in society. Little girls bake cookies and little boys play baseball. Therefore, women are not supposed to have sports on the brain.

There are, however, a number of women in the sports media who have worked hard to destroy this stereotype.

Kathy Renwald, for instance, a true sports veteran, has devoted 10 highly successful years to reporting sports for Hamilton's CHCH TV 11. Not only did she host her own Canadian Football League (CFL) information show, she will soon travel to Perth, Australia to cover the America's Cup yacht races.

"CHCH is very liberal in their policies," Renwald said, "and as a result, I have never been stopped from covering anything at this station." On the other hand, Renwald is acutely aware of what goes on in other sports rooms across the country. "There still seems to be a prejudice at many newspapers and TV stations to keep women 'in the ghetto.' But when you think about it, is it really any tougher to cover pro sports than it is to interview Ben Johnson?"

According to the *Toronto Star's* Mary Ormsby, it definitely is not tougher. A former volleyball star at Ohio State, Ormsby returned to Toronto and landed a job as sports reporter at the *Toronto Sun*. She then moved to the *Toronto Star* and was recently assigned to cover the World Cup Soccer tournament in Mexico City. As the first female sports reporter to be allowed into CFL dressing rooms, Ormsby presently covers the Canadian football and the college sports beat.

"As a rookie, I was assigned to the low profile sports," recalls Ormsby, "but you have to pay your dues. Men go through exactly the same thing.

As time went on, I showed initiative by asking for more assignments. Because I proved that I could do the job, I began to

work my way up the ladder."

Showing such initiative gave Ormsby credibility, and according to Mitch Azaria, reporter on Global TV's popular *Sportline* show, credibility is where it's at. "Credibility isn't distinguished by gender, it's something that you have to earn. If you do your job well, then people don't look at you as specifically a male or female sports reporter. They just see that you are doing a good job."

Bruce Dowbiggin concurs. "It's very important to get the names right and to know and understand your material. It's a tough job for women on the air because they are trying to pander to the male audience. I would be pleased to work with anybody who knows their style and can approach the media in a creative way."

That's what The Sports Network's (TSN) Diana MacDonald has accomplished. Before rejoining CBC sports in Prince Edward Island, she started in Ottawa working with the Athlete Information Bureau. The job peaked MacDonald's curiosity in amateur sport, and as a result she has cultivated this interest throughout her sportscasting career.

"When I was approached by TSN, I was with CBC sports in Vancouver at the time," said MacDonald. "But I came to the network knowing that I would be used fairly and to the best of my ability."

"I think that women can add another dimension to sports reporting. Pro sports reporting is not all hard core; there has to be a human interest side. That's why I like to give recognition to amateur sport athletes. I feel that the viewing audience can identify more with the athlete who works his way through school, yet can still achieve a level of athletic excellence, rather than the athlete who is paid a lot of money to perfect his craft."

Renwald, Ormsby and MacDonald have all proved that through experience, women are a valuable addition to sports reporting. But what about the women that are thrown into the role, who have no previous experience in sports? Andrea Carmen from Global TV and CITY TV's Ann Rohmer can best answer that question.

Currently assistant to the producer at Global's *World Report* with Peter Trueman, Carmen spent a year on the sports beat.

"When Gerry Dobson moved to CFTO sports, station management thought it would be nice to have a female as part of the sports department," Carmen said. "So, it was a token position to begin with, but because I had on-air experience, I did have potential."

Not having a sports background made the transition from news to sports all the more difficult. "I took the position with a great amount of trepidation," remembers Carmen. "It really was a big challenge. I wasn't just supposed to do light feature stories. I was also expected to cover sports from A-Z—everything from the Leafs to boxing.

To make up for her lack of sports knowl-

edge, Carmen poured over sports magazines, newspaper articles and relied on her cameraman for pertinent information. "The hardest part, however, was coming back to the studio and weeding through the information to come up with a one minute and 30 second report to give to the viewer," Carmen said. "Because I didn't have a statistical background, it was difficult to compare player performance from one season to the next."

During that year, Carmen honed her reporting skills and developed a pleasing on-air personality. She decided, however, after weighing the pros and cons, to return to the news department to develop another facet of her broadcast journalism career.

"I don't ever regret doing what I did. It was fun being a female sports reporter. Even today it is still considered quite a novelty," Carmen said.

The dynamo you see delivering the sportscasts on CITY TV is Ann Rohmer. The four months she has devoted to sportscasting is much different from anything she has done before. As co-host of Global's "That's Life" for five years, the switch from taped segments to live television was a major obstacle to overcome.

"I had always been interested in expanding my career," Rohmer said. "So, when (CITY TV president) Moses Znaimer called to see if I would be willing to take over from Debbie van Kieckebelt, I jumped at the chance!"

A former competitive figure skater, Rohmer says that she has always had sports in her blood. "Working at a local station like CITY has been great, as opposed to starting out at a major network. It's a good place to

learn the ropes and believe me, I make plenty of mistakes. But they seem to be willing to give me time to learn the trade."

"I've set very high goals for myself and I'm not even close to achieving them yet. But when I took the job, I knew that it would be tough. I felt that I was becoming complacent in my career outlook—and it's good to have that 'scared' feeling. It was time to get tough again.

"I may not stay forever, but sports reporting has been quite an experience."

All the women interviewed for this article have all been successful in their sports reporting careers. Whether or not they had the previous know-how, each and everyone gave it their best shot to become accepted by the viewing audience. Even those with the pretty faces had to put their noses to the grindstone.

The real breakthrough will come when Frank Gifford and Al Michaels of ABC's Monday Night Football will be joined in the broadcast booth by a woman. Those days are yet to come. Despite the advancement of women in sports, it will take the big time network executives a long while to come around.

Listening to Jim Kelly, the much-heralded quarterback for the Buffalo Bills, it may even be longer. "I don't like all those women in there (the dressing room), checking out the size of my pipes," he once said.

Wake up, Jim. You never know who's lurking around the corner. Just when you least expect it, some "broad" is going to ask you a question you can't answer. And then you'll wish that she really was just checking out your "pipes."



CITY-TV DYNAMO: Ann Rohmer, now a sports caster at CITY-TV, was co-host of Global's "That's Life" for five years but when Moses Znaimer (CITY-TV President) "called to see if I would be willing to take over from Debbie van Kieckebelt, I jumped at the chance." Rohmer is just one example of this new trend involving women in the sports media.