

Women & Sport

Tina Takahashi is ranked first in Canada and fifth in the world in her sport. Her international ranking high, Takahashi is understandably anxious to compete in the most prestigious of all athletic meets—the Olympics.

But to introduce her event to the Olympics would take an all-out battle with the International Olympic Committee, the Games' governing body. Takahashi's sport is judo—a male-oriented sport involving full body contact. At a meeting this past summer in Los Angeles, the IOC again turned down Judo Canada's request for a women's judo event at the 1988 Olympics, citing 'financial reasons'.

"This sounds like a pretty feeble excuse to me," says Takahashi. Since the judo mats and officials are already there for the men's events, she continues, it would cost little extra to add a women's event.

Takahashi is one of many female athletes coming up against barriers in the male-dominated sporting world. Widely held sexual stereotypes are frustrating women trying to pursue athletic excellence.

While it may not be socially acceptable for women to compete in non-traditional sports such as soccer and basketball, women are still denied equal opportunity in athletics. Sports administrators, most of the men, decided rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming were appropriate for women by including them in the 1984 Summer Olympics.

What makes the attitude-barrier women face in sports infuriating is that it is emotional and irrational. The ingrained belief of one hockey official sums up society's attitude towards women in sport. Asked what harm a girl playing on a boy's hockey team would do, he answered: "I don't know. It's my personal opinion. I don't believe it's appropriate and I don't feel it will do society any good."

The sporting world is a male world, built on a strict hierarchy with women stuck on the bottom rungs. Historically sport has been and continues to be a bastion of male supremacy and bonding, a world of rough-housing and locker room machismo.

Lynne Tyler, a member of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport, says we may be trying to confront sexual inequalities in the workplace, but inequalities in the sports arena live on.

"People don't question women working with men in the office any more," she says, "but some people think that if the sexes meet on the playing field, society will break down. Society is not ready for body contact. If male and female sports were integrated, coaches would quit. This kind of discrimination is unacceptable anywhere except in sports."

Women, sports and the law

"Court Denies Girl the Right to Play on Boys Team" read a headline in Toronto's *Globe and Mail* in 1979. The story was about Gail Cummings, a former hockey goaltender who fought to play on a boys' all-star team. Although the human rights commission ruled in Cummings' favour, the Ontario amateur hockey association appealed the decision to a higher court and it was overturned.

Over 50 complaints have come before Ontario's human rights commission regarding sports discrimination. They range from women objecting to restricted hours at private golf clubs to high school students wanting to train with the boys' wrestling team. The commission has been more successful at focusing public attention on the issues than promoting justice.

In 1981 the Ontario human rights commission recommended to the provincial government a change to the human rights code which would stop all public funding to any sports organization practicing sex discrimination. The Ontario government ignored this suggestion and instead amended the code to

If I can't play I don't want to be part of your team

By JULIE SCOTT



make differential treatment in sports services and facilities on the basis of sex acceptable.

A commission of inquiry into the issue toured Ontario last spring and found the public does not object to the change in the rights code. The commission found most people believe current sports programmes for men and women are adequate and there is no need to amend the discriminatory legislation.

What women are up against

The problem is not money. Dianne Palmason, an administrative intern with the Canadian Track and Field Association, says the problem is one of attitudes rather than money. "Generally, no sports association distinguishes between funds for athletes who meet certain standards."

Gail Blake, assistant director of athletics (women) at Carleton University, agrees. She says although the men's basketball team was allotted \$2,000 more than the women's team in 1983-84, the women's team receives sufficient funds. Even if the notoriously high football budget was reallocated, she says women's teams would stand to gain nothing. "We get all the money we ask for," says Blake.

The problem women face is unequal opportunity in national and international competitions. Until the 1984 Summer Olympics women could not compete in the marathon run. "The fighting it took to get this event shouldn't have been necessary," says Palmason. "It should be a given that women participate just like men."

At the Canada Games there are fewer events open to women than men because a large number of events, such as judo or the decathlon, are exclusively male. Under pres-

sure to increase women's events, the Canada Games Council has added mostly stereotypically female sports such as synchronized swimming.

Non-traditional women's sports are ignored. "What's happening is we're taking two steps forward and one step back," says Lynne Tyler. "The women's rugby teams are out there but the spotlight is on entertainment sports like rhythmic gymnastics."

Sue Holloway, a silver and bronze medalist in kayaking at the 1984 Olympics, says the largest obstacle for women kayakers is the lack of events open to women. "In kayaking women still don't compete in as many events as men," she says. "The people who organize regattas [meets] are unprepared to make a full slate of women's events."

Sport pistol Olympic gold medalist Linda Thom is angered by the lack of women's events at the Commonwealth Games. "We automatically assume that the games would encourage female teams, but chauvanism exists here," says Thom. "The organizers are dragging their asses."

Not only female athletes face sex discrimination either. Women who want to be coaches and sports administrators do not have the same opportunities as men. Palmason says the role of a coach represents the traditional male values of power and authority.

"When a woman becomes a coach she's bucking social values," says Palmason. "Some parents just won't have their kid compete if they know the coach is female. Societal rules dictate this."

Of the six female varsity teams at Carleton, women coach three. Unlike men's teams, few women's teams have apprentice coaching positions where women who want

to be coaches gain necessary experience. Few women who apply for a coaching job are as qualified as their male counterparts, who have likely gotten valuable experience through an apprenticeship.

Women are also under-represented in sports administration. Fitness and Amateur Sport of Canada has started a special intern programme for women to address the problem. "But the majority of administrators are still men," says Tyler. "Women are moving from low to middle positions but they still aren't at the highest levels."

Women's sports don't count

One reason for the glaring inequalities women face in sports is the rampant attitude that women's sports do not count. Media coverage for female sports typifies this attitude. As Sue Holloway points out, "Women athletes aren't high profile. They're usually covered on page four of the sports section."

Roger Theriault, the public relations person for the Carleton women's basketball team, says local newspapers give the team virtually no coverage. "The men's team gets a better break since it attracts a larger crowd and gets more media attention."

Linda Sadler, Carleton women's field hockey coach, sees a catch-22 situation for women's teams. Few people know about field hockey so few spectators show up, unlike football games which attract hordes of people. "The crowd can help the team win and once it wins, it gets more support," says Sadler. Until this cycle is set in motion, field hockey will remain a low profile sport.

Another attitude which hinders women is the rigid view of what is 'female' in sports. Again, the media is a prime culprit of this sexual stereotyping.

You've Come a Long Way, Ladies, a film documenting women in sports, has beautiful footage of female athletes—unfortunately it trivializes their performances by capturing them in sexual poses and not sweating a drop while working out. "This is not the real image of women in sports," says Lynne Tyler. "It's a sanitized version."

The Jane Fonda jump and bounce fitness craze epitomizes the 'female' sport society condones. Rather than promoting female fitness as a personal endeavour which shapes the body and mind, this fitness movement stresses fitness as a way of molding the female body into a socially desirable shape.

The danger of the Flashdance fitness craze lies in the attitudes of some of the women who don their colour co-ordinated leotards, tights, leg warmers and headbands to do jumping jacks to the thump-thump of "Beat It."

"Some women get into these programmes because they want to look a certain way, not because they want to feel a certain way," says Palmason.

Sexual stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes are so ingrained the goal of equality in sports may be unreachable. "At the rate we're going, it will take a hundred years before any real change comes about," says Tyler.

This is why some people are calling for action now. "We can't wait for the younger generation because it will just pick up the attitudes of the older generation," says Palmason. "The problem of women in sports calls for more active efforts."

Linda Thom's solution rests with women athletes themselves. She says the formula for success is the single-minded pursuit of excellence with a positive attitude.

When Thom aims her gun at the target during competition, she thinks positively and not about all the discrimination she faces.

"It's when you think negative thoughts that accidents happen, says Thom. "It's like walking on a narrow beam. It the beam is three feet off the ground you can walk across it no problem. It it's 100 feet off the ground you'd think yourself crazy to try. What you have to do is discard all distractions and aim for that goal." □

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