



Diane Palmason

In Praise of

Bien que l'image de la jeune femme athlète soit de mieux en mieux acceptée, l'activité de la femme âgée athlète est toujours limitée par le sexisme et les préjugés contre la vieillesse. Cet article présente des femmes âgées de quarante à quatre-vingts ans, qui continuent à faire du sport, course à pied, natation, tennis, et autres activités. Certaines d'entre elles continuent à battre les records qu'elles s'étaient elles-mêmes fixés. Ces personnes-là abattent les barrières, exposent les mythes, et sont des modèles pour les femmes âgées qui veulent participer à une activité physique.

"Athlete"

is an evocative word. What is the dominant image associated with that word? From the statuary of the ancient world to the sports pages of today's papers, the consensus is there: the ideal athlete is young and male. For centuries, sexism has restricted the opportunities for women in sport.

Granted, in every age there have been a few women — usually the most talented and gifted — who have been athletes. Mosaics from the third century A.D. show strong, athletic women of Carthage training for a variety of sports. Throughout the twentieth century the opportunities for girls and women to be athletic have increased considerably. Society's concept of who can be an athlete has been expanded by images of gymnasts, divers, and figure skaters. Young Canadian women have been inspired by the achievements of Elfi Schlagel, Janet

Older Women Athletes

Nutter, and Tracey Wainman.

A somewhat less unanimously accepted image is that of the woman whose sport entails strength and endurance rather than, or as well as, grace and skill. Nevertheless, in Canada we recognize and applaud downhill skiers Gerri Sorensen and Laurie Graham, sprinters Angella Taylor and Angela Bailey, and heptathletes Diane Jones and Jill Ross. These athletes become the role models by which other young women can pattern their participation in sport in Canada, despite the inequalities that still exist with respect to opportunities for women to become active and involved. Nonetheless, the "athlete" as young and female is a relatively accepted image.

But what of those who are no longer young? Do they fit our image of "athlete"? As the number of older people in our society increases, both absolutely and proportionally, so does the number of men for whom sport was once an integral part of their lives. In the early '70s, a few men in their forties, fifties, and sixties began to seek opportunities to compete with other men in their own age category. The "masters" or "veterans" movement — age-class competition, notably in swimming, skiing, cycling, racquet sports, and track and field — began to flourish. Along with sexism, ageism has coloured society's image of what an athlete should be. Whereas youth is associated with growth and strength, growing old is associated with decline and a loss of capacity that is thought to be not only inevitable but also irreversible. The men in the masters movement have challenged

and disproved these notions, recording performances in their fifties and sixties that show improvement over the standards that they set in their forties and, sometimes, even exceeding the performances of their youth. These masters, competing in "open" events, have also shown that the fit, well-trained, serious competitor in his sixties can outperform the twenty-year-olds who train less vigorously, despite the age discrepancy. The image of the older man who is an athlete is gaining acceptance as it challenges the precepts of ageism.

Thus the images associated with the word "athlete" have expanded to include women as well as men, older as well as younger men. Who is left out? The older woman! In general, society does not see "athlete" as an appropriate, or even a possible, role for the older woman. And why should it? When was the last time you saw coverage of masters women athletes on Saturday-afternoon TV sports, or a write-up of a masters women's event in the sports section of your paper? When such stories do appear, they are more likely to be printed on the lifestyles (i.e., women's) page. Even then the story takes a tone of "amazing that she does it at all" rather than accepting that "of course she does it" and emphasizing how well she does it — whether the "it" be cycling, running, swimming, skiing, or throwing the hammer.

(Though the hammer throw is not yet a recognized event for women in organized track and field, a California coach who trains women for this event — pointing to women's

lower centre of gravity and greater flexibility than men — comments that women have great potential for this event. Donna Radigan, forty-two, confirmed this opinion when she threw the hammer to an unofficial masters record at the North American Masters Track and Field Championships in Ottawa in August, 1982.)

To what extent does this lack of coverage reflect the fact that there is nothing to report? Are there older women whose lifestyles, training patterns, and performances give them the right to consider themselves athletes and to be recognized as such? The answer to this question, despite the double indemnity resulting from sexism and ageism, is unequivocally yes. Who are the top older women athletes? Where are they? At what do they excel?

To answer these questions, let us first accept that any woman who is over forty years of age and is involved in organized, competitive sport is an older woman athlete. For instance, there will be at least 500 such women from more than fifty countries at the Fifth World Veterans Track and Field Championships, to be held in Puerto Rico in September, 1983. They represent the elite among the thousands of women, particularly in North America, who are running, jumping, or throwing — sometimes all three — competitively. Masters swimming is also well organized, as is masters competition in cross-country skiing and all the racquet sports. To grasp the nature of the achievements of these older women athletes, let's look at some of these individuals and their performances.



Heather McKay, an Australian-born athlete who now lives in Canada, was the women's world-champion squash player for nineteen years. As she approached her fortieth birthday, she began to play raquetball and now, at the age of forty-two, she dominates that sport in the open as well as the masters category. Similarly, Beryl Burton, now in her mid-forties, has been and continues to be a top cyclist, both in her native Britain and on the European circuit. In recent years some of Beryl's strongest competition has come from her daughter. In the long road races both Burtons often finish well up, and sometimes win, in a mixed field.

In running, two outstanding women dominate the women's forty-plus, world-record listings. From 100 to 400 metres, the pacesetter is an Irishwoman, Maeve Kyle. Born in 1928, Maeve first became a member of the Irish national team in 1956 and competed in the Melbourne Olympics. She made all the national teams for the next eight years, specializing in the 400 metres. She then took a few years off before returning to competitive running in 1970. She did so well that she again earned a berth on the Irish team for the Commonwealth Games — at the age of forty-one. Maeve silenced those who criticized the decision to send a forty-one-year-old woman to represent Ireland by making the finals of the 400 metres. She ran the race in 55.3 seconds, a personal best that still stands as the world record for women over forty. Nor did she stop then. Maeve has continued to

compete, not only in the 400 but also in the 100 and the 200 metres. She holds world masters records in all three distances.

The holder of the fifty-plus, 400-metre record is another woman who began competing in middle-distance running when she was in her twenties and who now, like Maeve, is still competing in her fifties and setting age-class world records. Anne MacKenzie of South Africa set the world masters mark for 800 metres when she was forty-one, running the distance in 2:06.5, a time that is the envy of many an open-class (young) woman runner today.

These two women runners, and Beryl and Heather as well, are the exception rather than the rule among older women athletes, not only because of their talent but also because they are still competing in a sport they took up when relatively young. Another outstanding older woman runner has also been an active competitor since her youth. Joyce Smith of Britain was an excellent, if not world champion, track runner in her twenties. At that time she ran the shorter distances on the track because she had no choice. In 1964 the longest distance women were allowed to run was the 800 metres. By 1972 — Joyce was now in her thirties — women had "progressed" to the point where they could also compete in the 1,500 metres, which remained the longest distance for women in mixed international events until the 80s. In 1979 Joyce finally had a chance to run in an international competition for wom-

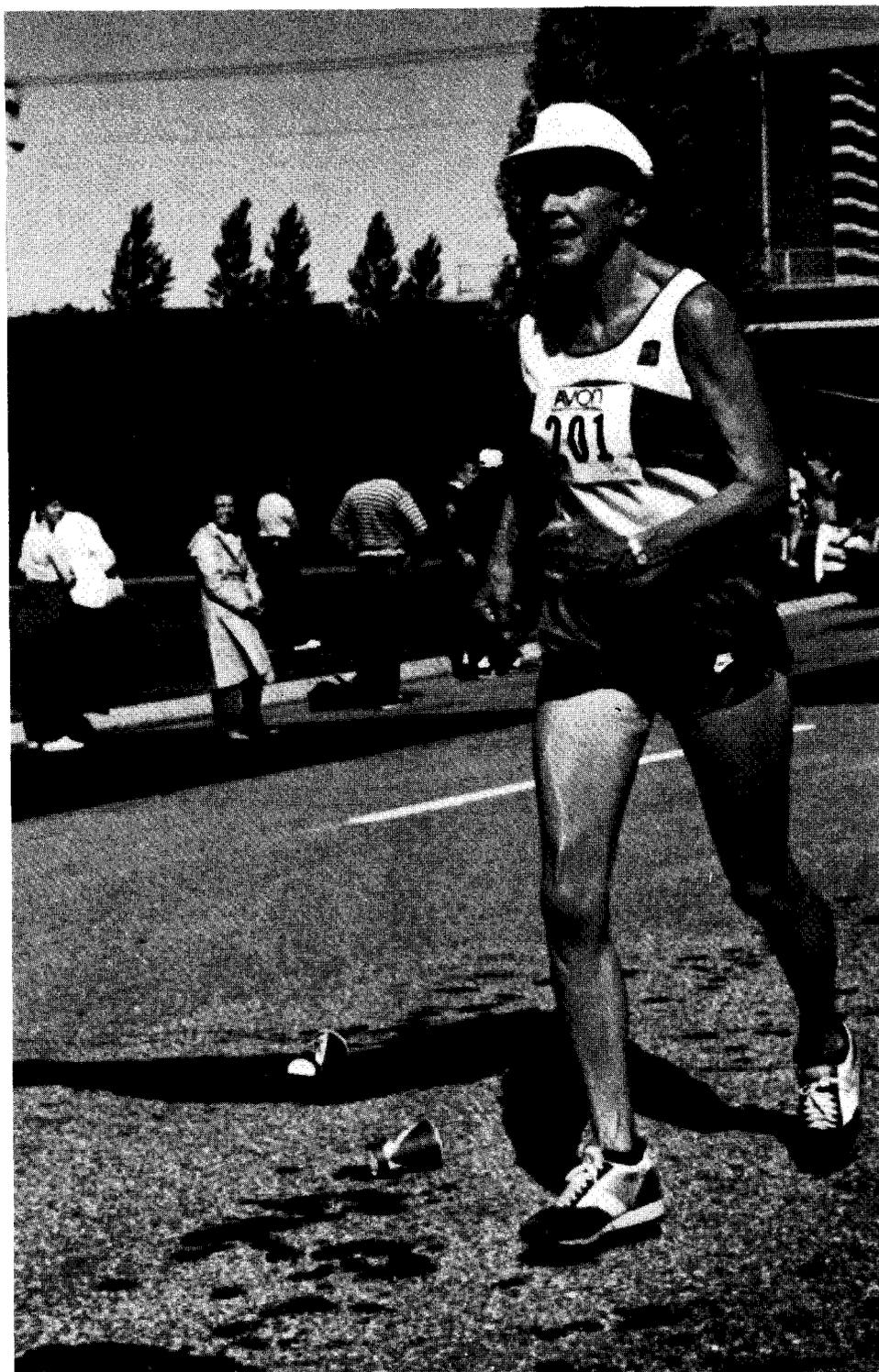
en in an event for which she was best suited — the 26-mile, 385-yard marathon. At the age of forty-one, she stunned the running community by winning the open women's (unofficial) world masters championship with a new world masters record of 2 hours:36 minutes:07 seconds (2:36:07). The following year she had improved her record to 2:33:32. She has improved every year since then, getting under 2:30 to 2:29:56 at the age of forty-three and down to 2:29:31 at age forty-four. These performances rank Joyce among the top five open women marathon runners in the world. Thus Joyce's pattern differs from Ann's and Maeve's in that she is still competing but in different events. It is interesting to speculate on Joyce's world standing and renown had she been allowed to compete in the marathon in her twenties and thirties.

Although the women's marathon has been added to the program for the 1984 Olympics, the 5,000-metre and 10,000-metre races are still "men only," a situation that contrasts with masters competition, where women in all age groups run all distances from 100 metres up to 5,000 and 10,000 metres on the track, and the marathon on the road. They set an example that the International Olympic Committee and International Amateur Athletic Federation would do well to consider. It is precisely because so many women who are now over forty were denied opportunities when they were young, either because an event was barred for women or because it was not considered acceptable or appropriate,

that they have taken a different route to competition. These women have taken up, and are excelling in, events in which they had no previous experience. This pattern is particularly noticeable among women runners fifty-plus, sixty-plus, seventy-plus, and — yes — even the eighty-plus class. The world record for the marathon in this last category is held by eighty-two-year-old Ruth Rothfarb of Boston and Florida, who began running at seventy-five and ran her first marathon at eighty (5:37). She has since lowered her mark to 5:35 and then to 5:28.

The world record holder for seventy-plus marathon runners is Mavis Lindgren, who progressed from a 4:45 run at seventy to a 4:33 posting at the age of seventy-three. Mavis, a Californian, is challenged at the shorter distances by one of Canada's most outstanding masters women athletes, Ivy Granstrom of Vancouver. Proudly sporting her "Poison Ivy" t-shirt, Ivy celebrated her seventieth birthday in 1982 by journeying to Ottawa for the North American Track and Field Championships. There she set Canadian seventy-plus records in the 100 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres, 5,000 metres, and 10,000 metres — all within two days — and always running with a guide. Ivy has been blind since birth.

Toronto's Judy Kazdan, an experienced marathoner who has been competing — and winning world-championship events — since 1975 is over sixty, and so is Lenore Marven of Winnipeg. Lenore, who started running at fifty-nine and cel-



brated her sixtieth birthday by running her first marathon, made her debut in international competition in 1982 and smashed the Canadian record for the 10,000 metres with a run of 48:45. Lenore was named Manitoba's Woman Runner of the Year for 1982.

But not all of Canada's top older women athletes are runners. In Calgary, sixty-four-year-old Ann Glenn trains daily to compete in seniors tennis, switching to badminton and

skating in the winter. Older women compete in badminton from coast to coast. Gladys and Annie Langaard of Halifax are tops in the Maritimes, while in Toronto Dorothy Tinline, sixty-two, continues to excel in the sport, in which she was four times Canadian open doubles champion. Another Canadian athlete who continues to compete in a sport at which she was once a Canadian open champion is forty-seven-year-old swimmer Beth Whittall. Beth

has been instrumental in organizing masters swimming in Canada, a sport that has attracted another forty-plus woman athlete with a name well known in swim circles. Peggy Quirk, mother of Wendy — a member of Canada's national team for five years — leaves no doubt that at least some of Wendy's talent came from her mother.

The Quirks are not the only mother-child athletic combination in Canada. For many older women, participation in sports becomes a new mode of relating to and being involved with their families. Eveline Saull, Canadian masters record holder for the 100, 200, and 400 metres, belongs to the same track club in Pointe Claire, Quebec, as one of her daughters, and the two train together. Ruth Fitzgerald of Lennoxville, winner of many fifty-plus events, is coached by her son John, a 2:30 marathoner. My eighteen-year-old son made the national open rankings for the 400-

metre hurdles in 1982; I made the national open rankings for the marathon. Thus we became the only mother-son combination to be nationally ranked in Canada.

All these older women athletes are, in many ways, the exceptions. They are the most talented, the record holders, the world-class competitors. Of what significance are their performances to the woman in the next office or across the street? They are significant because they break down barriers, they expose myths, they provide models that break with traditions of what older women can do and be. Their accomplishments encourage others to share in the benefits of participation in sport.

Many more women are encouraged to try other sports besides the more traditional golf, curling, and bowling. Older women are practising, training, and competing in age-class events in many sports. Sometimes they place and win in those

events. Ellen Pereira of Toronto received a commemorative necklace for her second-place finish in the fifty-plus category of an Avon race. She put it on with pride.

"When I was young, I never did anything sporting at all," she remarked. "Now, at fifty-three, I have become an athlete!" Indeed, why not?

Further Reading:

Ann M. Hall and Dorothy A. Richardson, *Fair Ball: Towards Sex Equality in Canadian Sport*, Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Ottawa, 1982.

R. Ferguson, *Who's Who in Canadian Sport*. Prentice-Hall of Canada, Scarborough, 1977.

Diane Palmason lives and works in Ottawa. She is forty-five years old and currently holds all the Canadian forty-plus records from 800-metres to the marathon. She is also a world-ranked masters athlete.

WOMEN'S REVIEW OF BOOKS

The Women's Review of Books, a new periodical, will begin publication this summer. The newspaper-format work will give attention to the literature that is coming out of the women's movement, since such literature is receiving a disproportionately small share of media attention. A pilot issue will appear this summer, followed by a monthly publication from next October onward. The pre-publication subscription rate (until September 1, 1983) is \$9.00 for twelve issues; thereafter the subscription rate is \$12.00 for individuals and \$25.00 for institutions. Tax-deductible donations will also be accepted.

Write Linda Gardiner, Dept. FP, *The Women's Review of Books*, 18 Norfolk Terrace, Wellesley, Massachusetts 02181.



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WOMEN'S ATHLETICS AT YORK UNIVERSITY

The mission of women's interuniversity athletics at York University, Downsview, Ontario, is to provide a challenging and rewarding program. Under the administrative direction of co-ordinator Mary Lyons, the Yeowomen find top-notch competition in twelve sports within the Ontario Women's Intercollegiate Athletic Association (OWIAA) and also qualify for national-level competition in five events.

In the 1982-83 season the Yeowomen won Ontario championships in ice hockey, squash, tennis, and volleyball.