

# “A Radiant Smile from the Lovely Lady”

## Overdetermined Femininity in “Ladies” Figure Skating

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*Abigail M. Feder*

*[W]hile sport denotes a bounded universe, it is one in transformative contact with discourses from narrative fiction, show business and fashion. It may well be that it is these points of contact that constitute the most revealing areas for analysis—as sites in which the articulation of contradictory ideological themes is at its most dynamic.*

—Garry Whannel (1984:101)

I became interested in exploring singles figure skating when I observed that, although the athletic requirements do not appear specifically gendered, the narrative surrounding the women's competition was sickly sweet in its presentation of the competitors' femininity. I discovered, as I will detail below, that in the original (short) program, for which the requirements are set by the International Skating Union (ISU), gender differences are built in. However in the free (long) program, for which the athletes choose their own material, there is little difference between the skills performed by men and women. Both are required to perform complex footwork and a variety of spins and jumps; no competitor would be taken seriously who does not have several triple jumps, and for both men and women the triple Axel is the most difficult jump performed (although one male and one female competitor also perform a quadruple jump).<sup>1</sup> Judging ranges from the fairly objective to the extremely subjective: jumps are judged on height and clean take-offs and landings; skaters are judged on how well they “relate” to their music. They are awarded two sets of marks, based on technical merit and on artistic impression.

Perhaps it is because of the equality in the skill of the performers that the narrative surrounding competition is so overdetermined in its construc-

tion of the women skaters' femininity. "Even if ideology cannot totally submerge itself as common sense, it can at least forward plausible suggestions for the reinterpretation of events. Ideology can never afford to let contradictory interpretations of reality go free from at least a crippling ambiguity" (Willis 1982:127). The almost hysterical assertion of gender difference presented in coverage of figure skating is not very commonsensical, but it certainly does tangle the ideological issues until they are almost beyond debate. The idea that men may not have a "natural" physical superiority is no longer out of the question: Evy Scotvold, who coaches U.S. skaters Nancy Kerrigan and Paul Wylie, said of Japan's Midori Ito, "The only man I've ever seen outjump her is [1988 Olympic gold medalist] Brian Boitano" (in Swift 1992:20), an opinion echoed by former Olympic champion Scott Hamilton during the CBS coverage of this year's games (see also Deford and Starr 1992:52). When physical capabilities no longer distinguish men and women, femininity is overdetermined to keep female athletes from being labeled as masculine or lesbian. This phenomenon can be observed everywhere in women's sports from the obsession with tennis player Monica Seles' latest "do" to professional golfer Jan Stephenson posing for a Marilyn Monroe style pin-up poster. "The more successful a female athlete, the more she tries to embody the culturally appropriate gender role [...] a role essentially at odds with her athleticism" (Faller 1987:154). This is, of course, assuming that the athlete wishes to avoid such a label; an out lesbian, such as Martina Navrotilova, need not bother.

"Femininity," wrote Susan Brownmiller, "must constantly reassure" (1984:15)—reassure that, no matter their accomplishments, women are "just girls" after all. This is especially true in the world of sports, in which "it is assumed that sports success is success at being masculine. Physical achievement, and masculine activity, are taken to be the same" (Willis 1982:123). Successful women athletes almost always risk being labeled "mannish," with implications of lesbianism close to the surface. The connection between femininity and reassurance was made explicit in a 1982 *Sports Illustrated* article on the above-mentioned Stephenson. "Stephenson did a lot for the image of women's golf in 1981. That was the year in which Billie Jean King admitted she'd had a lesbian affair and almost knocked a wheel off the apple cart of women's sports. And all during that perilous time, there was Stephenson out front on the sports pages, looking good and playing better" (McDermott 1982:31). Women must precariously negotiate their societally contradictory roles of woman and athlete. Nancy Therberge summarizes one strategy, Jan Felshin's theory of the female apologetic in sports:

Felshin characterized the social dynamic of women in sport as an anomaly [...]. As an extension of this, women in sport advance an apologetic for their involvement. The apologetic affirms a woman's femininity despite her athletic endeavors and thus "legitimizes the woman's role in sport by minimizing the anomaly." This legitimization is not complete, however, and social conflict over the contradictions inherent in women's sport activities persists. (1981:344)

Figure skating's "apology" is actually incorporated into the competition, where costume, makeup, and gesture feminize and soften the athletic prowess required for executing triple jumps and flying sit-spins. The fact the female competitors are still officially called "Ladies" under U.S. and ISU rules (a fact which even the typically unselfconscious U.S. television reporters felt the need to explain to its audience) is only the beginning (ABC 11 January 1992). Television coverage is framed in vignettes featur-

ing soft-focus lights, stars in little girls' eyes, glittery costumes, and flowers from adoring crowds. "A dream is a wish your heart makes when you're fast asleep" is the music accompanying shots of a little girl falling asleep surrounded by stuffed animals wearing gold medals which introduced ABC coverage of the 1992 U.S. National Championship; "You look wonderful tonight" sang Eric Clapton over close-ups of the 1992 female Olympic medal hopefuls as they prepared. In contrast, the framing device that introduced the men's finals played the percussive background to a Genesis song which has accompanying lyrics: "I can feel it coming in the air tonight," while computer animated lightning signaled each explosive editing cut. While the women were shown in flowing movement, in worried close-ups or applying makeup, the men were pictured doing their most difficult jumps, raising their hands in gestures of triumph. There is always an emphasis on the women skaters' physical beauty (and a corresponding denigration of the sport), which is related to their exchange value and the commodification which is the ultimate reward of Olympic victory. An insidious duality is established by labeling some women as athletic and others as artistic, with the artistry associated with physical beauty. Finally, the women competitors are never allowed to own their success, but are always identified in relationship to family, either biological or the extended family of their skating worlds; they are especially identified with their mothers.

The anxiety about the success of women athletes is most obviously symbolized by the Olympic practice of sex-ID testing, which proves how closely sports success and masculine identity are connected in our culture.

The idea of certifying female athletes as females originated more than 25 years ago. Athletic directors said they were trying to guard against male impostors, but a more subtle message was also being sent, said Alison Carlson, a member of the athletic federation's committee and a tennis coach. A successful female athlete "challenges society's notion of femininity," Ms. Carlson said, so both the athletic directors and the women themselves felt it important to prove they were real women. (Kolata 1992:E6)

In order to compete, women athletes must strive for strength, speed, and competitiveness—all those qualities which our society codes as masculine. "As an athlete becomes even more outstanding, she marks herself out as even more deviant [...]. To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man" (Willis 1982:123). So in order to avoid being coded as overly masculine or a lesbian, the athlete will participate in her own construction as a hyperfeminine creature.

Women in figure skating are caught in a trap that Naomi Wolf could have labeled "the bind of the Beauty Myth": a woman must live up to popular notions of beauty in order to compete successfully, both on the ice and in the commercial endorsement sweepstakes. The spectacle of their beauty is one factor in the fabulous popularity of women's figures skating, and why the women's competition is one of the few that is more popular than the men's equivalent. (The valorization of male athletes is reversed in those sports "whose 'aesthetic' properties encode them as suitably 'feminine' [Whannel 1984:104].) "When Katarina Witt won her second gold in '88, the prime time ratings [...] topped out past 35, the sort of number that baseball and basketball never fetch and that football obtains only for the Super Bowl itself" (Deford 1992:46). But the sport is taken less seriously precisely because its competitors are beautifully dressed and made-up women.

"The preservation of youthful beauty is one of the few intense preoccupations and competitive drives that society fully expects of its women, even as it holds them in disdain for being such a narcissistic lot" (Brownmiller 1984:167). One particularly overwrought male columnist wrote, "Figure skating—Should be dropped altogether. What used to be a genuine competition is now what 'Cats' is to musical comedy, a costumed, overwrought, pretentious joke. And what kind of game is it where the winner gets to wear cosmetics and skate on tour?" (Lincicome 1992:1).<sup>2</sup>

The concern with spectacle can be seen in the importance of women's costumes. Skating fashion found its way from the sports pages to the "Living Arts" section of the *New York Times*, because top fashion designers, including French haute couture designer Christian LaCroix, have begun to make skaters' costumes. Vera Wang described the outfits she designed for Nancy Kerrigan: "Nancy wanted me to translate the look of couture evening wear to the ice" (in Louie 1992:1). What was not pointed out is that all these costumes, in addition to sequins and tiny skirts, have some simulated nudity, whether it is a plunging neckline, a cutout back or "sheer illusion sleeves" (in Louie 1992:1); "Appearance, not accomplishment, is the feminine demonstration of desirability and worth. [...] Feminine armor is never metal or muscle, but paradoxically, an exaggeration of physical vulnerability that is reassuring (unthreatening) to men" (Brownmiller 1984:51).

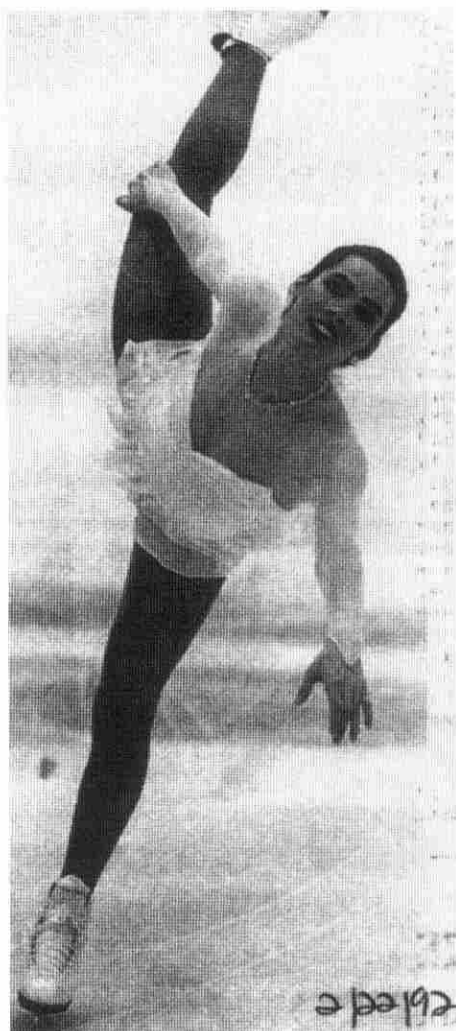
"So why do they play into it?" a male friend asked me. "What if they competed in full body coverings like the men?"

Debi Thomas, who won the bronze medal at the 1988 Olympic games, skated her short program in a sequined body stocking rather than a short skirt. Although she skated her program "flawlessly," according to a Canadian magazine ([O'Hara 1988:49] which might be expected to be free from U.S. partisanship), she received low artistic impression marks. If, as speculated, artistic impression for women skaters is connected to their femininity, perhaps the scores were connected to her costume, as opposed to Katarina Witt's, which made her look "like a member of the Rockette's chorus line" (O'Hara 1988:49).<sup>3</sup>

Dick Button, a former Olympic gold medalist who has covered skating for ABC for decades, commented in an interview about the women's competition: "The dress helps. The easiest thing is to get here. The hardest is to get that last 1 percent. You can't have anything out of place. Tonya Harding's dresses don't help" (*The New York Times* 1992:B13). Harding's costumes, although they had the ubiquitous short skirt and a cutout back, were also high necked with shoulder pads and a faintly military air about them, the kind of power lines usually reserved for the men (in fact, both 1988 gold medalist Brian Boitano and silver medalist Brian Orser wore outfits with military shoulders and trim). At the World Championships which followed the Olympics, Harding had softened both her music and the lines of her costume for her short program: her artistic impression scores went up.

Women can only find acceptance in those sports that are considered "feminine" and then are denigrated as lesser athletes. Nancy Kerrigan, according to numerous print and television profiles of her family, wanted to play ice hockey like her older brothers. But there were no teams for girls and her parents "felt figure skating would be more appropriate": "You're a girl. Do girl things," her mother recalled telling her (CBS 29 February 1992). Women are ghettoized into certain sports, then the sports are seen as less serious because mostly women participate in them. The coverage of the sports identifies the competitors as women first and then athletes.

1-4. Nancy Kerrigan was deemed the Grace Kelly, good girl, figure of the 1992 figure skating circuit. Two years before the 1994 Olympics controversy, the media concretely established an antithetical relationship between Kerrigan and "bad girl" Tonya Harding. Clockwise from top left: Sports Illustrated 76, 8 (2 March 1992), Sports Illustrated 76, 8 (2 March 1992), The New York Times, 22 February 1992:131; The Chicago Tribune, 20 February 1992:Sec. 4:1.



When Nancy Kerrigan took to the ice to skate her free program at the U.S. Nationals, Dick Button said, "Doesn't she look elegant," and Peggy Fleming agreed, "She looks like a little angel," thereby framing her program not as the competition of a serious athlete, but as the display of a beautiful woman. Verne Lundquist, commentator for CBS coverage of the Olympics, said of Kerrigan, "She has such an elegant presence [...] and then to skate that well," as if the beauty were natural and the skating skill an unexpected surprise in an Olympic athlete. An interview in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* with two-time Olympic gold medalist Katarina Witt pointed out this practice (even as it presented her in a centerfoldlike pose): "Coverage of the 1988 Winter Olympics at times degenerated into an overheated symposium on Katarina's sex appeal—from the shape of her legs to the lush arrangement of other body parts, most notably those that Katarina refers to matter-of-factly as her boobs and her butt" (Cook 1991:130).

Witt may be able to laugh at her objectification. In fact, she is laughing all the way to the bank, with several highly lucrative commercial endorsements. But the message that women, no matter how accomplished, will always also have to live up to highly unrealistic standards of physical beauty, causes harm for women and girls far beyond the spotlight of the Olympic winner's circle. An article in *People* magazine dropped the comment that the Soviet's pairs champion, Natalia Mishkutenok, looked a little chunky; the following week *People* ran a cover story bemoaning the tragedy of a young TV star who, after years of being the butt of fat jokes in the context of the show now suffers from anorexia nervosa. Somehow, they seemed to have missed the connection.

Objectification is about power.

[T]he female athlete is rendered a sex *object*—a body which may excel in sport, but which is primarily an object of pleasure for men. A useful technique, for if a woman seems to be encroaching too far, and too threateningly, into male sanctuaries, she can be symbolically vapourised and reconstituted as an object, a butt for smutty jokes and complacent elbow nudging. (Willis 1982:122)

Although the coverage of the 1992 Olympics seemed to tend closer to the worshipful than the smutty, the latter is not unknown in skating: "In Europe, anyway, by far the most popular photograph of any skater in recent years is not of anybody jumping, but of Witt coming completely out of the top of her outfit after a simple spin" (Deford 1992:50).

In a lecture on sports photography, University of Washington professor Diane Hagaman emphasized the need for sports photos to be a "good quick read [...] eye-catching [...] able to entice readers to read the text" (1992). They must also back up the image conveyed by the text, be it winning or losing, endurance or conflict. Therefore, sports photography depends on "highly conventionalized images" reinforcing the stereotypes it uses (Hagaman 1992). For example, the narrative surrounding Nancy Kerrigan was sure to emphasize her beauty and elegance; she could not step onto the ice without the commentators, male or female, remarking how "lovely-elegant-angelic-sophisticated" she is. Not surprisingly, therefore, many different newspapers and magazines caught her in the same arabesque pose from the end of her program, one long leg extended out behind her, arm extended out front, a very balletic pose (see Mackson 1992 [plate 2]; Cherney [plate 3]; Silverman [plate 4]).

Television editing can also manipulate our perception and lend credence to narrative. An impression of speed and choppiness can be emphasized by



use of cuts, which instantaneously switch from one shot to another; while flow and grace can be emphasized by use of dissolves, which gradually replace one shot with another. Kerrigan's long program had nine dissolves and eight cuts; in contrast Surya Bonaly, who is known as a choppy skater and dynamic jumper had only four dissolves to thirteen cuts.

Hagaman, who was looking at particular gestures representing victory, defeat, injury, and endurance did not observe gender differences in these particular gestures. But in figure skating, despite the similarity in skills performed, certain poses and gestures are gendered female. The most obvious is the forward layback spin: back arched, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, arms extended as for an embrace; it looks like nothing so much as popular conceptions of female sexual climax. The same pose is often used in fashion photography or "beauty pornography," as described by Naomi Wolf. "Beauty pornography looks like this: The perfected woman lies prone, pressing down her pelvis. Her back arches, her mouth is open, her eyes

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O L Y M P I C S



5. Mouth slightly open, open-necked, hands delicately placed across her chest, Kristi Yamaguchi embodies the ultimate feminized "Ladies" figure skating champion in a photo from the Sports Section of The New York Times, 11 January 1992:131.

Kristi Yamaguchi performing in the singles-competition final at the national figure skating championships Agence France

shut, [...] the position is female superior, the state of arousal, the plateau phase just preceding orgasm" (1991:132). In figure skating the forward layback spin is a requirement in the women's original program; the men never perform this skill. There have been more pictures of Yamaguchi in this position than in any other over the years (see Agence France 1992 [plate 5]). It presents a disturbing convergence of racist and sexist images, playing into stereotypes of the submissive Asian beauty. The virginal, elegant Kerrigan, in contrast, is rarely represented this way.<sup>4</sup>

It is not only the narrative surrounding skating which favors "feminine ladies." The judging is also skewed to reward such skaters. Skating is judged in two categories, technical merit and artistic impression. A maximum technical merit score is predetermined by the difficulty of the program, and then deductions are made for each error. There is a range of possible deductions, making the technical merit score far from objective. By far the most straightforward part of the program to judge is the jumps, because the order of difficulty is agreed upon and the success or failure of a jump is usually obvious. In the original program, for which the requirements are set, the men are expected to do at least two and perhaps three triple jumps, while the women are only *allowed* to do one triple jump. This requirement reduces the most objective end of the scoring—how difficult was the jump and did you land it cleanly—and gives far more emphasis to the more subjective areas of judgment that fall under "technical merit," along with the already nebulous category of "artistic impression."

The 1992 Olympic competition was filled with soul-searching debates over the direction the sport is going: Would it lose all its artistic beauty and become just a "jump-fest"? The Yamaguchi gold and Kerrigan bronze were hailed by many commentators and sportswriters as a clear victory for artistry (see Deford and Starr 1992); this debate undercuts the athletic abilities of these "artistic" skaters. "Although figure skaters train hard, they are schooled to make the difficult look easy. [...] They are] 'athlete[s] in disguise' who [skate], with unimpaired femininity, into hearts closed" to less feminine athletes (Guttman 1991:200–01). Yamaguchi's jumps at the Nationals were described as "beautiful, effortless, soft [...]. She does indeed float like a leaf" (ABC 12 January 1992). Katarina Witt said Yamaguchi "represents the sport in the right way. Because it's figure skating and it's not only sport, there's a big part of artistry involved. And her jumps look just so effortless, so easy and they're still so difficult" (CBS 19 February 1992).

What is always close to the surface, but rarely acknowledged, in the narrative of the artistry vs. athleticism debate is that for the women, artistry is indistinguishable from physical beauty. Japan's Midori Ito came the closest to expressing this when she explained why she relies on her athleticism over artistry: "All I can really do is jump. Figure skating is a matter of beauty, and Westerners are so stylish, so slender. I wish I could be beautiful like them" (in Deford 1992:51). According to a report in *USA Today*, compiled from interviews with coaches and various books on skating techniques, Ito has the ideal body for figure skating: "a compact body with a low center of gravity" (*USA Today* 1992:10). Ito did not question this apparent contradiction, but assumed that because she is not "beautiful" she could not be artistic. As Willis said of female weight-lifters, "the (at least reported) responses of the women [...] either collude in the sexualisation of the topic or reinforce the standards of male comparison" (131).

Why are artistry and athleticism mutually exclusive? A baseball player can be called poetry in motion; the balletic grace of Michael Jordan's jumps can be admired without implying any loss of athleticism. Comments



on the male skaters make it clear that the younger skaters are expected to grow into their artistry—which is related to elegance, showmanship, playing the audience, and choreographic maturity—and become “complete” skaters.<sup>5</sup>

Yamaguchi, on the other hand, grew into her artistry and, according to many, out of her athleticism. “Poor Yamaguchi. Paradoxically, in the past, she had always been labeled ‘the athlete’ in comparison to the artistic Jill Trenary. [...] Then suddenly Yamaguchi found herself written off as some kind of a bush leaguer just because she couldn’t hit the triple axel; never mind she can land all the other triples extant” (Deford 1992:47, 50). Only Ito and Harding among the women have completed the triple Axel in competition. Although most of the top men now perform the triple Axel, those who do not, such as Christopher Bowman (who won the U.S. Nationals without a triple Axel), and Olympic bronze medalist Peter Barna, are not considered *nonathletes*, simply less advanced. There were no reporters worrying over the future of the men’s competition because some athletes were acquiring new skills.

A woman’s athleticism is belittled, often undercut in commentary which calls attention away from her athletic ability and right back to her physical appearance. After Kerrigan completed a complicated triple-double combination, Scott Hamilton commented, “Perfectly done!” and Verne Lundquist chimed in, “That brings a radiant smile from the lovely lady.” After Yamaguchi’s double Axel, Hamilton said, “Look at the height and flow,” and Lundquist added, “And then look at the smile.” Says Brownmiller: “A major purpose of femininity is to mystify or minimize the functional aspects of a woman’s mind and body that are indistinguishable from a man’s” (1984:84). Yamaguchi’s coach Christy Ness complained about her athleticism not being taken seriously: “Kristi doesn’t lift weights to be called fluff” (in Swift 1992a:19); yet her weight-lifting was treated with fluffy, patronizing humor. *Sports Illustrated* reported that she had begun to lift “(very, very small) weights” to increase her strength (Swift 1991:18); while a TNT reporter joked that after getting off practice she thought about “things girls think about—weights!” as if this was the most unexpectedly comical thing he had ever encountered (TNT 20 February 1992). “Frequently, reporting of women’s sport takes its fundamental bearings, not on sport, but on humour, or the unusual. The tone is easy to recognise, it’s a version of the irony, the humour, the superiority, of the sophisticated towards the cranks” (Willis 1982:121).

*Newsweek* presented its version of the athlete vs. artist debate as a fairy tale, with an insidious, antifeminist moral.

Surely, there must be a fairy tale that fits here [...]. It’d be the one about the two stylish gorgeous creatures—swans or butterflies, take your pick—competing against the stronger, more daring beings for the favor of the gods. And, of course, the stronger, more daring beings are certain to win, because spectacular is always better ever after. Only, the stronger, more daring beings reach for too high a sky [...] and so the stylish gorgeous creatures glide to victory—and, probably, here comes a handsome prince or two, as well. [...] Oh, truth be told, it wasn’t all that neat. The athletes weren’t quite that klutzy, and the artists weren’t quite that wimpy, but let’s not louse up a good fairy tale. (Deford and Starr 1992:50)

“Ladies” will be rewarded for being “stylish and gorgeous” and punished for being too daring. *Sports Illustrated* presented a different take on the same

event: "This was a competition incorrectly billed as the athletes vs. the artists. [...] Yamaguchi and Kerrigan were plenty athletic. They were just minus one jump: the triple Axel" (Swift 1992:19). The athlete vs. artist dichotomy was even clearer in the 1988 competition, where preview articles such as one in *Time* magazine set up the competition between Thomas and Witt as "steely resolve" vs. "stylish allure," with accompanying pictures showing the former lifting weights and consulting with her coach, while the latter flirted with the judges and pouted at the camera (*Time* 1988:44-46).

"I always tell my girls: think like a man, but act and look like a woman," says former skater turned coach Carol Heiss (in Deford 1992:6). What does it mean to "think like a man"? A proper male attitude is one of ambition and competitiveness: Canadian skater Kurt Browning had a "job to do," which was winning the gold medal, while Kristi Yamaguchi skated for the love of it. He was lionized for being a "big game" skater; she was patted on the head for being very steady, consistent. She was allowed ambitions as long as they were couched in terms of little girl dreams, creating a continuity with past champions such as Dorothy Hamill, who was winning the gold around the time the current champions were first putting on skates. This connection was made by television interviewers who asked Yamaguchi, "Have you been dreaming of this moment?" and by television visuals in a fortunate moment when the cameras caught Yamaguchi talking to Hamill backstage before her free skate. It all seemed to lend credence to the framing device of the U.S. National Championships that I described above. To win the men's final, a competitor would need "all the ammunition you can fire" (CBS 15 February 1992), while Ito, the "Queen of the triple jumps" was going to have to be "on her toes" to win (19 February 1992).

The emotions that make for a good competitor do not fit those that make for a feminine woman. Kerrigan is admired as a genuine girl who, her father says, has "got all the emotions of anybody. If she's watching TV and something is sad she'll cry, if it's laughter she'll laugh" (CBS 19 February 1992). This image of Kerrigan was contrasted to that of the poised (read inscrutable?) Yamaguchi. Women aren't supposed to have the nerves and ambition to compete. TV is always searching for signs of women's instability, sure that they are always about to crack under the pressure. The framing device for the pairs final focussed exclusively on the women, with the implication that the men were a given, stable and solid as rocks:

It's a tale of two women [close-up of Natalia Mishkutenok]. One who has always exemplified grace under pressure [tape showing Mishkutenok lifted, spread-eagled, above her partner's head]. And one who wants so much to win it's sometimes gotten the best of her [close-up of Yelena Bechke looking up into her partner's eyes]—until it was the Olympic games [Bechke receiving a kiss from her partner after a successful original program]. [...] It's also the story of another woman who flew so high [Isabelle Bresseur being thrown by her partner], but couldn't land [Bresseur falling on her double Axel, then a cut to Bresseur backstage in tears]. Three different women, who with their partners tonight share one common purpose. (CBS 11 February 1992)

I find Frigga Haug's notion of "slavegirl competence" a useful framework for thinking of the way in which women both use and are victimized by the figure skating system. It "allows us both to grasp the relation of

structural domination within which femininity is subordinated to masculinity, and at the same time to portray women as active, albeit in the context of given constraints" (Haug 1987:131).

Women are made both supplementary and subordinate to men, they are abused as objects of sex and pleasure [...]. Yet women also know from their experience that *skill* is involved in conforming to prevailing rules and orderings. Among other things, we take pleasure in acquiring and endorsing the requisite skills. Our active appropriation of the rules makes us more self-confident in our activities; in availing ourselves of the existing order by actively "exhibiting" our own bodies, we participate in our own construction as slavegirls. (Haug 1987:144)

Yamaguchi, being interviewed while being fitted by her costume designer, stood in a red body suit and said: "I think it's important to create the entire mood of the program. [...] People come to watch you because, you know, it's supposed to be a beautiful sport and the costumes are just part of it" (CBS 21 February 1992). The active participation in her own construction as a passive object of beauty was stunningly ironic.

Yamaguchi's original program, much praised for the beauty of its choreography, is described by her choreographer Sandra Bezic as the moment when a girl looks in the mirror and realizes she's a beautiful woman. The beauty of Yamaguchi's program played into popular concepts of what Brownmiller describes as "preoccupied gestures that are considered sublimely feminine because they are sensuously self-involved" (1984:73). This sensuous self-involvement was admired by Martha Duffy in an article in *Time*:

They are at their most beautiful, these rarefied athletes, in the six-minute practice session where competitors warm up, a few at a time. Done by a Kerrigan, the waltz jump, a mere half revolution, is a perfection of grace. A double Axel is clear and open, not the whipped-up whirl a triple must be. Yamaguchi and Harding may land perfect leaps in tandem. [...] All the women are intently absorbed, and their jumps look less like stunts than whitecaps bubbling out of waves. (1992a:56)

Another way in which the figure skating coverage emphasized the femininity of its ladies was by constantly defining them in the context of their families, either their biological families or their skating world family. Biographical sketches of each of the three U.S. Olympians were contrasted: three different worlds. But the story worked like the classic family picture: Kristi Yamaguchi as firstborn, businesslike, an overachiever, out on her own—the bio featured Yamaguchi in her work environment and with her coaches. By foregrounding Yamaguchi's move to Canada to train, television was able to portray her as an outsider without ever referring to her race. Tonya Harding was the troubled middle child, firing and rehiring her coach, referring to her coach as her "employee," breaking up and reuniting with her husband, all evidence of a lack of values in the skating world; rebellious and unconventional, she is shown behind the wheel of a truck. Kerrigan (although actually the oldest of the three at 22) is the much-beloved baby of both this skating family and of her biological family in Massachusetts, with whom she is shown in happy domestic settings, ending at the dinner table toasting with milk (you could almost hear the dairy industry chortling with glee). In subsequent newspaper and television coverage, these themes were picked up again and again: stories about Yamaguchi

emphasizing her wonderful working relationship with her coach and choreographer, her poise, her consistency ("Kristi's greatest strength is her lack of weaknesses," said Hamilton before her original program); stories about Harding emphasizing her personal troubles, her foolish stubbornness; and stories about Kerrigan always emphasizing her family, especially her "mother and best friend Brenda [who] is legally blind" (ABC 12 January 1992), an appealing human-interest story that TV milked for all it was worth.

Kerrigan's family was the most overplayed, but hers certainly wasn't the only mother displayed. Families were big in the Olympic coverage. Families sell. The U.S. Postal Service brought over a number of athletes' families to see the games in exchange for product endorsements. "Pride and profit, that's why we're in it," said Postmaster General Anthony Frank (CBS 19 February 1992). The commercial appeal of family is linked to the commercial appeal of femininity. Before the pairs were to free skate, Charles Kuralt and Scott Hamilton did a special on the mothers in the stands—but only the mothers of the women. Said Hamilton, "Especially for the women in the pairs team the mother must really go through a lot because of the danger involved. [...] If I was a mother of a child and my little girl was out there and somebody dropped her..." (CBS 11 February 1992). Women skaters are little girls. Kuralt finished up, "Skaters' mothers pull for their children." By only showing the mothers of women skaters, they reinforced the assumption that the women are children.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this same touching portrayal can take on the ugly stereotype of the stage mother, who Hamilton calls the "nightmare mother [...who] thinks they know everything about skating, they know more than any coach. [...] Everybody in the building is against them, everyone hopes their child falls." This seemed to be the case with French skater Surya Bonaly and her mother Suzanne: "[T]he Olympic gold medal [...] is clearly the tangible object of her adoptive mother's desire. [...] With apparent manipulative encouragement from her mother, Bonaly has turned into [...] a chippie [...] the sort of school kid who would pinch the other students or pull their hair" (Hersh 1992b, sec.4:2).

A woman's success is not her own but a collaborative effort between skater and her biological family or her surrogate family of coach and choreographer. On the "CBS Morning" program preview of the Ladies Original Program, Harry Smith asked Kerrigan's parents, "Tell me a little about what it takes to get a daughter on the ice in the Olympics. How much work is it? Dad?" When Daniel Kerrigan would have given all the credit to Nancy—"[It's] all her work. She does it all. [...] She came here on her own"—Smith turned to her mother and persisted: "Doesn't it really take a family commitment, Brenda?" What they don't care to mention are those skaters whose families were not so supportive: for example, Harding, whose parents divorced, whose mother married six times, and who was sexually assaulted by an older brother (Deford 1992:52). But women must be portrayed in relationship; only men can thrive as lone individuals.

Women will be punished for not being good girls. Coverage of Yamaguchi emphasized her steady, professional, but also close and loving working relationship with her choreographer and coach: "Says U.S. coach Don Laws: 'Kristi has the ideal temperament for a skater. She trusts her coach, her parents, and her program'" (Duffy 1992b:49). Coverage of Kerrigan made her the perfect loving, obedient daughter and best friend of her blind mother. Harding was portrayed as recalcitrant and headstrong; she called her coach an employee rather than a surrogate parent or friend; and she was "rightfully" punished for not "honoring her mother":

Harding's fourth-place finish in France was not surprising, given how erratically she had trained and her strong-willed decision to defy jet lag and travel fatigue by leaving Portland only three days before the competition began. [...] Teachman [her fired coach] said "I'm looking forward to working with other skaters who are hard workers, respectful of their coaches and are a joy to work with. I wish Tonya and her new 'employee' all the best." (Hersh 1992a, sec.3:2)

For a while, Harding's rugged individualism was treated with admiration, especially by sports writers who usually cover men's sports. She was a "blond hotspur," a "tough cookie," who had been through so much, who would never give up,<sup>7</sup> the "gallant asthmatic." She skated in an ad for Texaco which emphasized her "boundless energy." But for a woman, strong-willed behavior is obviously wrong, and punishment is the "not surprising" outcome. Why was Harding's rebellion so obviously contained in the moral of her punishment, while quite similar erratic relationships with various coaches by U.S. skater Christopher Bowman (and more serious allegations of illegal drug use) were regarded as just a part of his unconventional personality. Bowman laughed at his own bad boy reputation, nicknaming himself "Hans Brinker from Hell" and skating in his exhibition to Buster Poindexter's "I'm Just a Bad Boy," mugging for the cameras with a showmanship that commentators treat with slightly exasperated but affectionate amusement.

Similar showmanship nearly led to an international incident when French skater Surya Bonaly performed a back-flip during warm-ups the morning of the original program. She was castigated on television and in the press for intimidating poor Midori Ito—"an illegal trick," all gasped with horror. "Intimidation," they murmured. "What are the ethics involved?" asked Tim McCarver. "I was a little shocked. [...] I heard that Surya Bonaly did this already the third time this week," reported Witt (who was herself legendary for her ability to intimidate her competition during warm-ups). It was only added as an afterthought that Bonaly always does a back-flip during her warm-up, that although it is illegal in competition, it is a popular part of her exhibition, that as the local favorite in France she was naturally playing to the crowd, and that when she heard that she might have distracted Ito, she apologized. Her "active flamboyance" did not win over the press. Ito won wide sympathy on American television when she apologized to her whole country for falling during her ladies original program. American audiences could both admire her humble shyness and implicitly bash the Japanese for putting so much pressure on such a sweet girl. It was almost as if Ito was a poor child being held hostage by the power- and glory-hungry Japanese. Coverage of Ito's slip under pressure was handled much more sympathetically in the U.S. press than Harding's.

In large measure, the Olympics are an audition for future commercial endorsements; my perception was that the sponsors and therefore the TV coverage favored Kerrigan as the most marketable all-American beauty. Allen Gutman writing on the history of women in sports noted that "advertisements are here to stay and that most advertisements will use physically attractive rather than unattractive models" (1991:263), ignoring the fact that advertisements not only reward but also determine what is attractive in our society. Frank Deford, in his preview of the games, predicted the possibility that a Yamaguchi win would touch off feelings of racism: "And now: what's a good ole boy to do if there's not only a Toyota in the

driveway and a Sony in the bedroom and a Mitsubishi in the family room—but on the screen there, as the band plays the 'Star-Spangled Banner,' is the All-American girl of 1992, and her name is Yamaguchi?" (1992:53). An article in *Business Week* after the Olympics stated that Yamaguchi was not getting the offers a white champion would have gotten ("The environment to 'max out' on her earning potential is not enhanced by the present mood of the country toward Japan," said one agent [1992:40]). Subsequently, Yamaguchi's agent denied the story, telling reporters that they simply had no time to sort through offers.

Yamaguchi has appeared on boxes of Kellogg's Special K, a cereal marketed to dieters. Several months after the Olympics, E.M. Swift wrote in *Sport Illustrated* "Post-Olympic endorsements were down for all athletes in 1992, probably due to the sluggish economy. Still, Yamaguchi did pretty well. She signed lucrative deals with Hoechst Celanese Corporation, which makes acetate fabric for fashion designers, and DuraSoft contact lenses" (1992b:75). Yamaguchi's television commercial for DuraSoft was especially interesting. She tells us that ever since the Olympics, people have been encouraging her to change. A series of comic vignettes follows, with Kristi taking up tennis and hosting a talk show. But when she really wants to change, she goes "blue, green, violet": in other words she changes the color of her eyes, changes them to colors an Asian woman would not normally have. Kerrigan, who resembles Julia Roberts with her flowing curly hair and toothy smile, is considered by many to be an ideal product endorser. In naming Kerrigan one of the "50 Most Beautiful People in the World," *People* magazine wrote, "Kristi Yamaguchi may have won the Olympic gold last year, but bronze-medal winner Nancy Kerrigan got the gasps for her Grace Kelly gleam." The article also confirmed that Kerrigan had six-figure endorsement contracts (1993:138). She was labeled the "Irish Katarina Witt" during the 1992 Olympics. Witt is Diet Coke's current poster girl, and Diet Coke-Nutra Sweet sponsors Ladies figure skating. Kerrigan was the only 1992 Olympic skater to have a prior commercial relationship with Coke, having done a Coke Classic commercial in 1988, playing the character of a Russian skater, not herself. Because of these circumstances, I was not surprised that the coverage of the Nationals and the Olympics should have focussed on Kerrigan to a degree that might have seemed out of proportion to her chances of winning a gold medal.

Of course, poor Yamaguchi will probably earn millions in product endorsements and professional skating appearances. But the issues are larger than what this particular group of women go through to achieve success. What are the images and dreams we are presenting for young girls to emulate and for young boys to expect of women? What will it do to a girl's self-image if she is told that Midori Ito, Tonya Harding, or Debi Thomas is not beautiful enough, that Natalia Mishkutonek is chunky? It is not only in figure skating. Speed skating gold medalist Bonnie Blair was shown a few mornings after she finished competing being "made over." Her "wholesome image and nice smile" made her attractive as a possible product pitcher, but only with a "new do" and makeup, only when she could conform as closely as possible to societal norms of beauty. The newscaster reporting the story observed, "I'm not sure if she liked that makeover" (CBS 19 February 1992). But like it or not, there she was, reassuring the public that despite her lightning speed, she's still "just a girl." Since then, Blair has turned up on McDonald's commercials in her Olympic jacket and new makeup. The metaphor that Greg Faller uses to describe romance could also apply to commercial endorsement:



The promise of romantic union [or commercial success?] works like the three golden apples Melanion rolled in front of Atalanta. They will be seduced from their position of culturally unacceptable power and dominance in a masculine pastime to a culturally demanded position of submissive femininity within the patriarchal family. (1987:157)

### Notes

1. The Axel, named for skater Axel Paulson, is the only jump the skater attempts while moving forward, making the triple Axel three and a half revolutions.
2. This is the same columnist who wrote a subsequent column disguised as his own brother because he was so ashamed that most of America's medals had been won by women.
3. What is considered too "theatrical"? After the 1988 games the ISU adopted the so-called "Katarina" rule in response to the costume worn by the East German skater which scandalized the opposition: cut high in the leg and decorated with feathers, one opposing coach compared it to a G-string. The rule states that women must have hips and buttocks fully covered and that beads, sequins, and feathers cannot be excessive (Louie 1992:4). After watching this year's competition, especially in the pairs and ice dancing, I've got to wonder who is making these judgments!
4. In my review of two years worth of articles in magazines and newspapers leading up to the Olympic games I never saw one photo of Kerrigan in this pose, although all the other top skaters (Harding, Ito, and Bonaly) were pictured this way at least twice. The notable exception is the picture of Kerrigan which is a prominent part of the cover montage for "*Life Remembers '92*" (1993a). An irate reader wrote, "Did you guys forget Kristi Yamaguchi was the gold medal winner for the U.S.A.? 'Racist' is a very harsh word, but I can't think of any other word to explain this inexcusable slight." The editors replied, "All the cover images were chosen for their complementary shape, composition and perspective" (1993b:30). My research would indicate that *Life* would have had to pass many representations of Yamaguchi in this pose in order to put an atypical Kerrigan photo on its cover.
5. This is not to say that the male skaters completely escape the stigma of being involved in a "feminized sport." In his autobiography Kurt Browning felt the need to write, "Let me just say, 'I like girls.'" Pairs skater Rocky Marval's mother said in an interview, "It was hard to accept a figure skater which is of course known for tutus and ballet."
6. Men's mothers were sometimes mentioned. One Russian skater was supporting his mother and grandmother on his stipend. Hamilton gave a eulogy for his mother, who died of cancer before he won his Olympic medal, describing her as "perfect." But her perfection seemed to lie not in active influence, but in unquestioning support: "She always let me be me" (CBS 11 February 1992).
7. *New York Times* columnist George Vecsey used his admiration of Harding as a backdoor way of insulting U.S. Todd Eldridge. Eldridge did not choose to compete in the U.S. Nationals but made the Olympic team anyway because he was the world bronze medalist; Harding, who was also injured, chose to compete, although she was the world silver medalist. "She did not get this far by being afraid of falling. Harding did not want to qualify for the Winter Games by the whim of a committee. Drag racers don't do it that way" (1992:19). The obvious implication was that Harding was more macho than Eldridge.

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**Abigail M. Feder** is a graduate student in the Ph.D. program in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern University. Her major area of interest is representation in American popular culture, including black-face minstrelsy, film melodrama, and musical theatre and film. She is planning to write her dissertation on the construction of normative femininity in musical theatre and film in the late 1940s and early '50s.