



Jere Longman

The Girls of Summer
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The Beauty of Women's Sports

In my job covering international sport as chief Olympics correspondent for The New York Times, I would estimate that at least half of the stories I write are about women. From Babe Didrikson to Wilma Rudolph to Jackie Joyner-Kersey to Marion Jones to Mia Hamm, women often provide the most compelling stories on my beat. Women obviously have to overcome more cultural hurdles than men, which lends resonance to their stories. Women are also often eager to speak about themselves and their accomplishments because the mainstream media has traditionally ignored them. As a reporter, I am always seeking out fresh, untold stories, and these often are the stories of female athletes.

As the father of a young daughter who plays soccer and softball and runs track, I am also intrigued by the gender issues that attend female sports — especially evident during the 1999 Women's World Cup — and the troubling idea that women still have to prove their femininity when they sweat, whereas male athletes are appreciated simply for playing the game.

The pioneering aspect of women's sports also is especially appealing to me, the determination to succeed in the face of predicted failure by others. The Girls of Summer were long ignored, and often told that no one would pay to watch them play, that they could never fill up giant football stadiums, that they would not attract a significant television audience. Yet the players remained convinced that they had something worthwhile to offer and, given the chance, would attract a wide following. And they were right. I have seen the same determination in the Chinese soccer players in a country where women are considered the wrong sex, and in female distance runners from Africa, who are expected to live subservient lives but who forge their own personal and financial independence through sports.

—Jere Longman