Female Athlete Memoirs as Postfeminist Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Athlete memoirs are a popular sports genre. They are often marketed as tales of fidelity that candidly detail an athlete's journey to success. This paper conducts a narrative analysis of athlete memoirs to uncover how white female athletes present themselves and their experiences. The memoirs under analysis are Letters To A Young Gymnast by Nadia Comăneci, In the Water They Can't See You Cry by Amanda Beard, and Brave Enough by Jessie Diggins. This paper answers the research question: how do white female athletes utilize the memoir genre to construct their self-narratives and experiences? Postfeminism and feminist standpoint theory serve as theoretical frameworks to support the interpretation of the data. The findings of this paper identify how female athletes employ postfeminist tropes such as individuality, empowerment, and self-governance in articulating their athletic success. They describe their involvement in sports in ways that normalize the masculinization of athletics and do not demand changing the structures that make succeeding in this male-dominant industry feasible for less privileged athletes. A prevalent theme in the athletes' memoirs analyzed is that hard work and resilience always lead to individual success.

Keywords

Postfeminism, feminist standpoint theory, narrative analysis, athlete memoirs, heterosexism

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Introduction

In *Letters To A Young Gymnast*, Nadia Comăneci (2003) says, "The power to make it to the top and stay there comes from within alone" (p. 74). This quote can be analyzed through the lens of postfeminism, a term that claims the goals of feminism–namely equality–have been achieved. Postfeminism privileges individualism while overlooking the impact that race, class, and gender can have on one's means to succeed. This quote establishes the foundation on which Comăneci believes athletic success is achieved. The sports industry mirrors society. Inferring that success is inevitable if one works hard enough ignores systemic barriers which can impact the way sports organizations are run.

This paper will examine how female athletes use the memoir genre to narrate their experiences as professional athletes. The first memoir under analysis is *Letters to a Young Gymnast* by Nadia Comăneci (2003). Nadia Comăneci is a Romanian-American former gymnast. She competed in the 1976 Summer Olympics, where, at only fourteen years of age, she famously broke the World Record and scored a perfect ten, requiring the judges to break the scoreboard to display her result (Comăneci, 2003, p. 44). The second memoir, *In the Water They Can't See You Cry,* is by Amanda Beard. Beard is a former American swimmer and seven-time Olympic medalist. She won silver at the 1996 Summer Olympics when she was only fourteen and continued to have a successful career (Beard, 2012, p. 49). The final memoir, *Brave Enough*, was written by American cross-country skier Jessie Diggins. She and her teammate Kikkan Randall won gold in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games (p. 233). The pair made history, winning the first Olympic medal in cross-country skiing for the United States in over 40 years (p. 206).

Postfeminism and feminist standpoint theory form the theoretical basis upon which I will dissect and critique these memoirs. This paper examines how athlete memoirs reproduce or challenge dominant themes of athleticism and success. When I refer to these dominant themes, I am suggesting that sports and athletics have historically been viewed as patriarchal institutions created by and for men. The sports the women in my sample compete in are gender equal, yet it is important to note that it has not always been this way across sports disciplines. For many years, women were barred from competing in some sports disciplines as they were deemed 'physically weaker' than men.

Moreover, some sports are costly and largely inaccessible to more vulnerable groups. Sports participation of racialized women in Canada is hindered by experiences of racism and sexism (Joseph

et al, 2022, p. 873). Systemic racism and white privilege can impact the operation of sports institutions, limiting or rendering the accomplishments of women of colour invisible (p. 877).

Despite these structural barriers, a prevalent notion in the athletes' memoirs analyzed is that hard work and resilience always lead to individual success. The main research question this paper aims to answer is: How do white women construct their identity as elite athletes through the genre of memoir?

Memoir as a Genre

Memoir is a genre in which an author writes about a period of their life. Kerley (2014) describes memoirs as "an aspect of rhetoric that aims to take individual stories and communicate a narrative to a large, diverse audience" (p. 29). Memoirists utilize this genre to share important moments and aspects of their identity (p. 30). While current published memoirs are diverse, it was not until the women's liberation movement that there was a rise in memoirs written by women and people of colour (Couser, 2012, p. 150).

Memoirs can be discerned into two genres: "Somebody Memoirs" and "Nobody Memoirs" (Kerley, 2014, p. 32). "Somebody Memoirs" are described as memoirs written by an already-established figure, such as a celebrity or, in this case, an Olympic athlete (p. 32). In contrast, "Nobody Memoirs" are characterized as being written by someone who is not known in the public eye (p. 32).

The memoir genre is not simply a literary form; it offers the audience a moral and political model expected to be true and objective (Couser, 2012, p. 53). Yet, writing a memoir poses different ethical concerns compared to writing fiction. Memoirists are expected to be accurate in their depictions of real-life events and real people (Couser, 2012, p. 80). The frequent spectacularization of memoirs undermines this demand for fidelity for entertainment purposes, as memoirs are ultimately a product to be sold (p. 80). In addition, memoirs recount a person's life and rely on the author's recollections (p. 81). When an author's recollection is distorted, it affects not only the story they are telling but also how their identity is constructed. Couser (2012) claims identity is a core aspect of memoirs (p. 89). Yet many Somebody Memoirs are written with the help of a co-writer who helps the author construct their story, find their voice, and submit for publication. While the help of a co-writer—who was most likely not directly involved in the events the author is sharing—and the fickle nature of memory may influence the truthfulness of the stories, memoirs are

widely accepted as truth (Kerley, 2014, p. 41). How an author narrates their life impacts how their audience views the author's identity (p. 41). Sports memoirs are mostly written by accomplished athletes—they are well-known, have won medals or awards, competed on the international stage, earned sponsorships, and given back to their community. These memoirs document their successes and experiences. Memoirs may hold greater significance in the analysis of an athlete's construction of identity due to the assumption that the author has provided objective testimony in recounting their experiences. As this paper aims to understand how white female athletes utilize the memoir genre to construct their identity, it is increasingly important to be aware of the language and narrative patterns within a memoir. It is important to note that how athletes assert their identity may be impacted by their standpoint as women.

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is a critical feminist theory that examines the distinctive experiences of women in a socially constructed, capitalistic, and patriarchal society (Intemann, 2020, p. 2). FST theorists argue that as women are oppressed in a patriarchal context, they develop a "double consciousness" through which they become aware of both their own lives and the lives of the dominant group in society (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296). One of the key theorists of FST, Sandra Harding, posits that marginalized people may gain a stronger knowledge of social reality, or what she calls "epistemic advantage" (Rolin, 2009, p 218). Epistemic advantage is the knowledge accessed through a feminist standpoint, which consists of recognizing how patriarchy and hegemony are upheld and disproportionately affect those who belong to marginalized groups (p. 218). As such, FST functions as a tool to "centralize women's experiences in the research process, viewing them as a point of entry for the creation of new knowledge" (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296)

I will incorporate FST in a unique and alternative way. Rather than using FST to articulate how the athletes in my sample experience oppression and thus have a unique viewpoint on the world, I will draw from FST to argue that the athletes in my sample hold privileged positions as white middle-upper-class women, and this blinds them to the inequities that exist amongst more marginalized groups of women. FST will serve as a way to acknowledge whether the athletes recognize their privilege and incorporate it as part of their story.

Female Athletes' Standpoint and Barriers to Self-Expression

Several studies examine how sportswomen attempt to control the construction of their identities. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) argue that sportswomen are constantly navigating the lines between "athlete" and "feminine" (p. 28). This dichotomy reproduces a view of female athletes that

reflects the pervasive influence of traditional gender definitions and postfeminist tropes (p. 12). For example, Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018) content analysis found that female athletes post under three main themes: "self-love, self-disclosure, and self-empowerment" (p. 13). These themes contribute to the notion that a woman's own individual efforts will lead her to happiness and success. The authors argue that on social media, female athletes are frequently producing content that encourages other women to love their bodies and take control over their happiness (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018, pp. 13-25). The authors also note that female athletes tend to broadcast themselves as self-loving individuals who work to achieve success, feel confident or empowered, and create media coverage for themselves and their respective sports (pp. 28-29). These public accounts define women's success as an individual feat while ignoring the oppressive barriers they may face.

A similar finding is presented in Kane, LaVoi, and Fink's (2013) study, which interviewed female athlete participants and examined the images the athletes claimed best represent them and their sport (p. 287). The images chosen illustrate the participants' attempt to balance the dual identifications as women and athletes (pp. 287-288). This indicates that female athletes are aware of balancing their athleticism with femininity. This preoccupation with performing femininity challenges the stereotype that women who compete in male-dominated sports are "manly" or "lesbian" (Kane et al, 2013, p. 293). Using photographs that highlight women's athleticism, however, is an integral step to further the professionalization of women's sports. These studies demonstrate how common it is for sportswomen to advocate for themselves in ways that inadvertently contribute to a patriarchal view of femininity and athleticism.

Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, and Stirling (2022) recognize the greater implications associated with athletes' lack of voice (p. 4). Utilizing the method of participant observation, the researchers asked Canadian athletes, both male and female, how their national sports organization (NSO) could become a more inclusive, welcoming, and holistic space (p. 5). One of their main findings was that many Canadian athletes felt they lacked agency, power, and autonomy (p. 10). There are 49 NSOs in Canada, and only 39 have an athlete representative on their board of directors (p. 10). It is integral that athletes are included in decision-making processes as they are the ones directly impacted by such decisions. Many NSOs in Canada are self-governed (Willson et al, 2022, p. 10). The board of directors are largely made up of volunteers, and their decisions frequently remain unchallenged by other institutions (p. 10). The athletes' recommendations made in this study "reflect broader challenges to power structures seen outside of sport" (p. 10). This illustrates how external dynamics

and systemic structures may impact how sports governing bodies are structured, which impacts how athletes are viewed and make sense of their roles. The limited number of athlete representatives in each NSO illustrates this power imbalance. It reinforces the notion that athletes lack agency when they are not offered enough fair opportunities to self-advocate. This holds greater implications beyond simply providing a space for athletes to share their stories. Many athletes feared self-advocacy because their sport fosters a "culture of fear and silence" (Willson et al, 2022, p. 4). Athletes may be afraid to share their experiences if a potential consequence is neglect and verbal or psychological abuse (pp. 9-10). This is a critical point to consider, especially in the context of athletes' memoirs.

Many athlete memoirs are written after the athlete has retired—but not always. Memoirs offer an avenue for athletes to share the unseen parts of their athletic career—both positive and negative experiences. It is worth questioning whether the reason many memoirs are written after an athlete has retired is because the athlete will no longer need to report and abide by the regulations of their sport governing body. If athletes are only speaking out after they have left their sports institution, the tribulations they face may persist to the detriment of the next generation of athletes.

Female Athlete's Discursive Construction of Identity

Balancing female athletes' identity with femininity is a common finding in studies focusing on this experience. This duality is occasionally met with resistance, yet when sports are characterized as "manly" or in the "male domain," they reaffirm and normalize the underrepresentation of women in sports (Kavoura et al, 2017, p. 246). The discourse surrounding elite sports often determines what defines an athlete and what is "natural" and "unnatural" (p. 248). Examining the ways female judo wrestlers articulate their identity through a Foucauldian discourse analysis enabled Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba (2017) to recognize how these dominant discursive patterns shape our ways of thinking and understanding what is and is not true (p. 240). When women self-identify in ways that oppose the gender binary of what constitutes a female athlete, they are, in one way, challenging the status quo. Still, they are also inadvertently contributing to the discourse on "female biological inferiority" (p. 248). For example, Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba (2017) found that a team of female judo wrestlers "differentiated themselves from ordinary women by performing the self-image of exceptional beings, born with masculine qualities, such as competitiveness, tolerance to pain, and the ability to fight" (p. 248). When female athletes self-identify this way (e.g., as aggressive), they are placed outside the binary definitions of womanhood (p. 248). While using

language that reaffirms sports as masculine normalizes the underrepresentation of women in sports, it is possible that women may simply be using this language as a tactic to survive in this male domain (p. 246). Employing this language and omitting criticism appeals to postfeminist tropes.

Postfeminism, as a product of hegemony, adopts the aesthetics and façade of feminism to keep women subjected to patriarchy. A key critical feminist theorist who uses postfeminism to study this subjectification is Angela McRobbie. McRobbie (2004) describes postfeminism as the notion that there is no need to continue the battle for feminism and gender equality because, from a postfeminist perspective, equality has been achieved (p. 255). The notion that feminist tropes of freedom, choice, and bodily autonomy have been achieved suggests that feminism is "a thing of the past" (p. 255). Moreover, this infers that feminism has, on some level, been "transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). This further discredits the need for feminism's revival (p. 256).

One of the main tropes of postfeminism is female empowerment and choice. A key aspect that emerges through self-empowerment is the idea of female success. In a postfeminist landscape, where gender equality is said to have been achieved, the idea of success becomes an individual feat. The notion that there are no longer systemic barriers that prevent women from achieving the same professional and educational goals as men suggests that women must take responsibility for self-governance to achieve their goals and be deemed successful. This notion of female success then engenders a heightened sense of individualism—to be successful in a postfeminist society, the process of achieving female success becomes a "me" rather than a "we" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 257). This implies there is no need for a collective undertaking towards a fairer and more just society.

One of the criticisms of adopting a postfeminist lens is that it holds contemporary views of gender equality that are highly limited. For example, one of the themes associated with postfeminism is choice, which infers that women are fully capable of attaining the same type of job as their male counterparts (Tasker et al, 2007, p. 2). This not only illustrates how a postfeminist perspective fails to consider the socio-economic disparities in society but also assumes that a woman's decision to work is not influenced by necessity (p. 2). Therefore, postfeminism is exclusionary and assumes that the values and themes associated with feminism—individuality, choice, bodily autonomy, and professional or educational endeavours—are universally shared amongst all women (p. 2). It ignores intersectionality, overlooking the influence of age, race, and class on women's behaviour and choice

(p. 2). This further excludes marginalized women, as it infers that the most affluent and privileged in society get to participate and thus demonstrate their capacity to achieve female success (p. 2).

Methodology

The purposive sampling method for this study consists of three memoirs written by female athletes who competed in sports for at least five years at an elite level (e.g., Olympics, World Championships, National Championships, etc.) and won Olympic medals. These parameters ensure that these athletes have been exposed to professional sports and are relatively well-known in their field.

It is important to note that all of the memoirs in my sample were written by white women who currently live in North America. As such, my analysis cannot account for the experiences of white women outside North America and the experiences of racialized athletes. Part of the reason why I chose to analyze memoirs written by white athletes is because I hold an interest in looking deeper into privileged experiences. This is important, as there are not many studies that directly interrogate a privileged standpoint—most studies that employ FST do so when analyzing the experiences of marginalized women. A limitation of purposive sampling is that the findings cannot be generalized. As the sample only includes three memoirs, my discussion of findings only extends to the cases I analyzed.

The method of data analysis will be a narrative inquiry. This qualitative method is concerned with studying descriptive accounts of people or characters. According to Butler-Kisber (2010), a narrative inquiry offers "distinctive ways of thinking and understanding… [which] integrates the physical and psychological dimensions of knowing" (p. 62). In other words, a narrative inquiry allows unique perspectives and ways of thinking to be disseminated. Storytelling allows individuals to make sense of their experiences, cultural life, and identity (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63).

Analysis

Throughout this analysis, I will be referring to the protagonist/author of each memoir as "the heroine." A heroine is highly admired for her courage or achievements; she is seen as the ideal female character. Using this term positions the athletes in a narrative framework. I have divided my findings into three parts: the hegemonic heroine, the adversity, and the resolution, and I relate some of my interpretations to that of a fairy tale. When I refer to this fairy tale narrative, I am referring to a Western, patriarchal fairy tale, one which depicts a 'happily ever after' where all adversities are

overcome, and the heroine finds herself in a romantic heterosexual partnership. The findings of this study are of my own interpretation and should not dissuade anyone from reading the athletes' memoirs.

The Hegemonic Heroine

Unlike the traditional fairy tale narrative where the female heroine needs a prince to save her, the athlete memoirs in my sample detail stories from women who are highly independent, motivated, and disciplined. Most of their stories defy traditional fairy tale narratives—they don't need a man to save them or achieve their goals for them. The memoirs in my sample all begin with a recollection of the athlete—the heroine—as a child. These memories allow the reader to understand how they got involved in their sport. Common descriptions of their childhood highlight their bountiful energy and supportive family members who encouraged them to participate in sports. Due to their keenness to play sports, the heroines describe themselves as "tomboys" (Comăneci, 2003, p. 11; Beard, 2012, p. 6). In addition, each heroine makes a point of saying how participating in sports was akin to doing something 'for boys,' yet this never held them back. For example, Comăneci (2003) says she "used to practice every day so that the boys would allow me to play on their teams" (p. 7). Similarly, Diggins (2021) states, "The more something was labelled a 'boy thing' because of how tough or gross or physically draining it was, the more I wanted to do it" (p. x). And lastly, Beard (2012) holds similar sentiments when she says, "I didn't care if they were 'boys' sports or not… I was the son [my dad] never had" (p. 11).

These statements reflect the hegemonic tendency to consider sports as belonging exclusively to the male domain. Rather than challenging the sexist connotations of these sentiments—such as drawing attention to the lack of logical reasoning to back up the notion that 'physically draining' sports are for boys—the heroines use these stereotypical statements to further a postfeminist agenda. This relates to McRobbie's (2004) description of "the new female subject" as someone who withholds the critique of sexism to demonstrate her freedom (p. 260). Rather than criticize the sexist ideologies around sports, which can impact the desire for girls and women to begin participating in the first place, the heroines imply that believing in themselves and working hard is the most effective way to earn their place. By omitting criticism, the heroines inadvertently advocate for feminism's dismantlement. They focus on what Tasker et al (2007) call the "production of the self," which is where individuals withhold critique in favour of demonstrating their independent empowerment (p.

2). The heroines do not challenge this stereotype and, instead, use it to further a heightened individual narrative.

When Diggins (2021) says, "If boys do that sort of thing, then I will too" (p. x), she fails to acknowledge the inequities that exist and continue to persist in high-performance sports and instead, turns this institutional issue into a matter of personal effort. This statement reflects 'girl power' sentiments, which encourages individuals to chase their dreams rather than address the barriers that may make it more challenging—or impossible—for others to do the same. 'Girl power' is embedded within a neoliberal discourse of choice (Zaslow, 2009). This implies that girls can choose when they want to be perceived as powerful or girly (Zaslow, 2009). This type of discourse celebrates dominant forms of femininity but fails to advocate for social change. These statements relate to McRobbie's (2004) work on postfeminism, as they can be seen as "gentle denunciations of feminism" (p. 257). The heroines share how they didn't let the notion that sports are for boys undermine their vocation. In doing so, they suggest that young women can be responsible for their own social change. Early feminist standpoint theorists argued that gender division offered ways for women to identify assumptions that were problematic and held by the dominant group in society (Intemann, 2020, p. 2). FST suggests that women's experiences can be used to dismantle these dominant assumptions (p. 2). Yet the heroine's articulation of their early experience in sports does not challenge hegemonic ideas.

This discrepancy could be explained by considering the athletes' standpoint as white, affluent women. This privilege may impact their self-perception and belief that self-discipline leads to success. Unlike racialized athletes, who face oppression and stereotypes, the white heroines, who possess the means to be disciplined, can try any sport they want. Perhaps a reason Diggins supports this girl power mentality is because she competes in cross-country skiing. Men and women have the same number of races each season and earn the same prize money (McMahon, 2012; Small, 2022). Despite this, there are still barriers that make entering sports more challenging for marginalized groups. This fact goes unnoticed by all three heroines.

Another way these statements undermine feminism is by inferring that their achievements are a product of female individualism. The heroines write as if accessing sports from a young age is a widespread and normal experience and as if morally and financially supportive family members are something to be expected and not the exception. Beard (2012) shares how her seemingly endless youthful energy persuaded her parents to enroll her "in every activity under the sun" (p. 11). Diggins (2021) shares a similar sentiment by stating that her parents "started signing me up for any sport I

wanted to try" (p. 11). Sports participation does not come without a cost. To participate, one needs access in the form of financial support, living in a geographical area with sports infrastructure, and the familial support the heroines describe. This is not everybody's experience. Perhaps a reason the heroines never acknowledge their privilege or the hurdles that make entering professional sports not universally accessible is because of how they grew up. They experienced supportive environments where they were never told they would fail. Being surrounded by this kind of encouragement might have impacted how they believe success is achieved; in this environment, the heroines may have never considered the possibility of failure. The heroines in my sample do not appear to acknowledge that barriers to sports participation exist. By failing to recognize the privilege in their upbringing, the heroines regard their entrance and continuation in sports as a product of their own freedom of choice. It is then through this freedom to choose that they can begin to hold themselves accountable to achieve success. This is not to say they don't have an awareness of the relations of power that persist in a patriarchal, capitalistic society (and sports system), but they do not call it out. While they may have a "double consciousness," which means that they recognize the unfairness of women's life experiences in contrast to the dominant group (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296), their standpoint as white, middle-class women may prevent them from fully understanding or describing this in their memoirs.

In contrast, the heroines' narratives present frequent claims demonstrating their privilege. Diggins (2021) writes candidly about the emotional support she received from her family members. She recalls that

> I was raised in a culture where my parents and grandparents taught me that I could do anything I set my mind to, regardless of my gender, size, and age. I was always empowered to go outside, try something new, and be fearless (p. 7).

These recollections and statements contribute to the notion that athletes are made when they are children; an adult will rarely try a new sport, commit to training every day, hire a coach, purchase the proper equipment, and become the next best competitor. Additionally, sports are costly, yet even this seemingly clear barrier to sports is never acknowledged. In fact, it is dismissed by Comăneci (2003) when she says, "... a level of personal and financial commitment will grow if it's meant to be" (p. 80). The phrase "if it's meant to be" is dismissive and adheres to a postfeminist viewpoint of success; one's individual efforts measure success; if one wants to succeed, they must work hard, be disciplined, and stay empowered.

All these statements contribute to the notion that becoming an elite athlete requires a certain amount of financial breadth, familial support, and self-discipline. These conclusions overlook the impact of race, class, and gender on one's individual success. In addition to ignoring the difficulty of accessing some sports, the heroines make statements that further imply that becoming a professional athlete requires a type of resiliency that one either has or does not have. For example, Diggins (2021) states that she "inherit[ed] my dad's tolerance for pain" (p. 45). Similarly, Comăneci (2003) says, "My father was always filled with a sense of joy in life, and I believe I inherited that from him in the joy I get from movement" (p. 7). It is noteworthy to mention how these traits are described as being inherited from their fathers, not their mothers. This contributes to sexist ideologies of sports and athletics. Employing 'masculine' language to describe their athleticism is a prominent pattern across my sample. For example, when Diggins (2021) is preparing for a race, she describes feeling "like a gladiator getting ready to go fight" (p. 215). Similarly, Beard (2012) refers to feeling like "a speeding bullet" (p. 13) when diving into the pool. It is of interest to question the truthfulness of these statements. Even if such descriptions are effective literary devices, they appeal to the hegemonic masculinization of athletics.

The Adversity

The second theme found in this sample is adversity. After the heroine has discovered a love for her sport, she runs into some sort of roadblock. Interestingly, the source of such adversity is rarely acknowledged. For example, one common form of adversity is an eating disorder. Both Diggins and Beard share their struggle with their body image and their disordered eating. While I am critical of the way overcoming this obstacle is depicted, I want to clarify that I am not trying to trivialize their experiences; eating disorders are nuanced and can plague anyone regardless of whether they compete in sports. Eating disorders are common in endurance sports, where Diggins and Beard competed. Neither one of them mentions the ubiquity of eating disorders in their sports or high-performance sports in general. Additionally, they don't address Western society's predisposition to favour thinness and how the 'ideal athletic body' often reflects this cultural ideology.

More importantly, overcoming this adversity is narrated as an individual process. By this, it is not only a matter of making choices to achieve female athletic success, but it is about making the right choices. This narrative ignores the fact that people who possess less economic or societal privilege don't have the opportunity to make such choices to begin with. For example, when Diggins

was seeking treatment for her eating disorder, she lived in residency at The Emily Program, a costly eating disorder treatment centre. Privileging the freedom of choice ignores the instances of systemic disparity, such as socioeconomic class positions, which limits women's capacity to have and make the same choices (McRobbie, 2004, p. 261).

Beard describes other instances of adversity when she shares how she was bullied (Beard, 2012, p. 106). Beard (2012) explains how being bullied impacted her performance in races by saying, "too much negativity weighted down on me" (p. 198). She then shares how the bullying, coupled with the stress of competing, led her to seek help from a therapist (p. 220). Despite acknowledging this help, she shares how she eventually stopped therapy and claims, "I didn't need [my therapist] anymore because I could do it on my own" (p. 220). This is once again reminiscent of a girl power attitude. It infers that even if people seek help to overcome an obstacle, they should inevitably become self-sufficient.

Similar sentiments are articulated by Comăneci (2003), who, while not suffering from an eating disorder or bullying, experienced her own form of adversity when she took six months off from competitive training (p. 68). She refers to getting back into shape as a highly individualistic endeavour when she says, "No matter how much support you're given from family, friends, and coaches, ultimately you have to succeed on your own" (p. 74). Such statements of heightened individualism seem to discredit the earlier mentions of her childhood, where she described growing up with family members who supported her athletic dreams. Yet it is this very part of her experience that perhaps contributes to her belief that hard work is solely an individual matter. Comăneci's comment reflects her upbringing and her experience as a young athlete; she achieved success by working hard and having the resources to train. Therefore, she believes anyone else in a similar situation will also be similarly successful. She embodies the empowered, self-disciplined, postfeminist athlete when she says, "I believe in being your own biggest supporter because that means you will always have someone in your corner" (Comăneci, 2003, p. 75). Moreover, she emphasizes her belief in the meritocratic ideology of sport when she says,

> Hard work will always get you somewhere. If you have a little talent and work very hard, then you have a shot at being a big winner. And if you have a lucky star in your hand, then you may just accomplish your goals (p. 79).

Ironically, this statement seems to contradict itself. Initially, Comăneci appears to adhere to the hegemonic notion of Western meritocracy; she declares that consistently working hard will inevitably

lead to success. Yet she then contradicts this statement by inferring that luck is involved. While one might consider this to be a moment when Comăneci is acknowledging her own privilege—despite growing up under a communist regime in Romania, she was privy to resources that citizens who were not athletes did not receive—the mention of luck discredits the notion that working hard will inevitably lead to success. If luck is a crucial ingredient in achieving one's athletic goals, then one must ask why discipline is necessary at all. As if in response to this, Comăneci (2003) then shares, "It doesn't matter whether you win gold medals. What matters is that you strive to be your best and then struggle to be even better" (p. 84). The point of overcoming adversity is to be a winner, regardless of whether this involves medals or not.

Comăneci embodies the idea of becoming the best version of yourself, which can only be achieved by holding yourself accountable and pushing through adversity, regardless of where it comes from. Rather than challenging the source of the adversity or attempting to dismantle the oppression underprivileged athletes face, the goal is to overcome it. This sentiment is also shared by Beard (2012), who discusses how after she switched swim teams and coaches, she was having more positive experiences and had fewer urges to harm herself (p. 211). This suggests that her previous environment was contributing to her deteriorating mental health, eating disorder, and self-harm practices. This goes unacknowledged, as the point of this story is not to call out the harmful practices that can occur in elite sports environments; the sole goal of experiencing such trauma is to come out on top. This is what it means to be a winner.

The Resolution

The final sections of the athlete memoirs are where they read like Western, patriarchal fairy tales the most. In my sample, each memoir ends with the heroine describing how she met her boyfriend or husband and how they got engaged and married. Additionally, they either share their experience of having children or express a desire to one day have children. While romantic partnerships and creating families are personal aspects of many people's lives, it is of interest to consider the ubiquity of this narrative across my sample. One would think that a memoir about athletic success would end with a remark about the experience of competing and having a career as a professional athlete. Yet all there is in the last few chapters is a detailed recount of their relationships, which are all heterosexual. Comăneci (2003) shares details from her wedding, reminiscent of a fairy tale. She said she wore "a gorgeous gown with a 23-foot train covered with 10,000 pearls" (p. 173). She also refers to her adversities and relates overcoming them to this moment when she says, "...

everything I'd been through in my entire life was culminating in total happiness" (p. 166). Through this statement, she implies that one of the rewards of overcoming hardships is finding a romantic partner. Ending the memoirs in this way further restricts the meaning of what it is to be a successful female athlete.

A key point the heroines make is that female athletic success is not based on medals. Yet, all the athletes in my sample have won Olympic medals and, as such, hold this prestige and are offered the opportunity to control their narrative. Success, as defined by the heroines in my sample, comes from self-discipline, believing in one's abilities, doing things even those just considered 'for boys,' and overcoming obstacles independently. Success is not defined by standing up for others or challenging institutions that oppress marginalized groups. Rather, female success is achieved when the heroine meets the love of her life. While achieving one's athletic goals does not require 'saving' or assistance from a man, a successful woman must have a romantic partner. Their heterosexual relationships become a key part of their story.

Throughout all the setbacks and challenges these elite athletes experienced, they recall their decision to have a romantic relationship as being one of their biggest rewards. For example, Diggins (2021) says, "Perhaps the part of my life where I feel I've been the bravest is starting a life with someone I love" (p. 269). Similarly, Beard (2012) shares a sentiment on her shifting identity when she says, "I found my groove when it came to the title of 'mom,' and soon I came to love it more than 'Olympian' or anything else I've been called" (p. 232). These sentiments relate to McRobbie's (2004) description and critique of "gender anxieties," which asserts that some popular cultural texts normalize postfeminist ideas, such as the worry that one may never meet "the one" or become too old to have children (p. 262). These anxieties contribute to the postfeminist parameters of choice. Despite athlete memoirs being marketed as tales of athletic success, they still end with remarks on their conventional desires. As McRobbie (2004) argues, these choices and descriptions of gender anxieties reaffirm what "constitutes livable lives for young women without the occasion of re-invented feminism" (p. 262). A new regime of female athletic success is established by including details of the heroines' romantic relationships and declaring such partnerships as more rewarding than Olympic medals.

The most interesting aspect of this fairy tale narrative is that it persists across all three memoirs, spanning nearly two decades. It is perhaps not surprising that the oldest memoir, written by Comăneci and published in 2003, adheres to the fairy tale narrative the most, as seen in

statements such as, "It seemed my Prince Charming had finally kissed me and I'd awakened after a long sleep" (p. 166). Statements that adhere to patriarchal conventions persist until the final page. For example, when addressing where the future of the rest of their life is headed, the heroines share their desire to continue to contribute to the existing world of elite sport. Comăneci (2003) shares how she and her husband opened a gymnastics training facility and hope to train gymnasts to a level where they can obtain college scholarships (p. 177).

While the heroines make claims of leadership, giving back to their communities, and supporting causes they care about, they ultimately do not demand change. They contribute to the cycle of athletics, which, according to them, requires self-discipline, inherited athletic traits, and luck. Despite seemingly positive representation in women's athletics, it does not mean that entrance and continuation in sports have progressed for women. Watson and colleagues (2018) argue that FST "centralizes women's experiences in the research process, viewing them as a point of entry for the creation of new knowledge" (p. 296). Perhaps a reason the heroines do not demand change or challenge the status quo is that they are still trying to survive in this male domain. Despite the heroine's 'girl power' sentiments and their encouragement of girls and women to chase their dreams, one must consider whether their sports environments are truly feminist spaces. Even sports like cross-country skiing and swimming, which offer the same competitive opportunities for both men and women, must be challenged. Perhaps perpetuating athletics as inherently masculine or sharing their desire to contribute to the sporting system without changing it is a coping mechanism for female athletes in this anti-feminist space. These narratives could be reflective of broader exclusions in the sporting world. They make visible the discriminatory practices in sports and produce a postfeminist narrative.

The heroines largely omit criticism and do not challenge athletic stereotypes. The reason for this is that the memoirs are fairy tales; the point is not to address their privileged standpoint, call out the institutional barriers that make accessing sport or sport-related resources challenging, or demand the dismantlement of harmful ideologies around success and the ideal athletic personality. The point of these stories is to inspire, motivate, and empower the reader. If the reader cannot achieve athletic success, they can find success in other areas of their life, whether through romantic partnerships or giving back to the systems that made them. While these stories are ultimately idealistic and lack a critical reflection of their upbringing and stereotypical descriptions, there is certainly something innately human in the desire to encourage one another to keep going.

Conclusion

The three memoirs analyzed can be seen as fairy tales in which the heroines achieve hegemonic success and find happiness in a romantic partner. Since this narrative persists across all three memoirs, it is interesting to consider whether the heroines were encouraged to write so openly and extensively about their interpersonal relationships. Perhaps the inclusion of the heroine's romantic life is meant to showcase the negotiation of the duality of being perceived as feminine and athletic. Both memoirs by Diggins and Beard were written with an accompanying author. These authors, Todd Smith and Rebecca Paley, have extensive experience in co-authoring memoirs. While editing and collaborating are part of authorship, it is important to question whether the ideas and narratives in the heroine's memoirs are authentic and true. The pervasiveness of the fairy tale ending highlights the notion that sports marketing reinforces hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism. While writing about their relationships may have allowed the heroines to explore other facets of their identity, they ultimately connect them back to their athletic endeavours, thus reinforcing the idea that heterosexual partnerships are intrinsically tied to female athletic success.

By analyzing the memoirs through postfeminism and FST, I could isolate quotes that exemplified postfeminist tropes and revealed the standpoints of these athletes. While the omission of a feminist critique does not qualify a text as postfeminist, the way the female athletes refer to themselves as 'tomboys' and claim to have inherited athletic traits from their fathers appeals to the masculinization of athletics. They may not need a man to accomplish their goals, but they often attribute their success to their 'masculine' qualities. Moreover, they articulate their success as a highly individualistic endeavour. These two findings are consistent across my sample and adhere to tropes of postfeminism. This suggests that these texts function as feminine texts rather than feminist texts. Indeed, these memoirs offer what Alison Harvey (2020) calls "feminine leadership" (p. 165). Feminine leadership is when women combat exclusion at the individual level without engaging in feminist action (p. 165). For example, this happens when a woman succeeds in a male-dominant industry without changing the structures that make such success challenging. Feminist leadership, on the other hand, actively challenges the patriarchy and is "motivated by fairness, justice, and equality" (Harvey, 2020, p. 165).

There are limitations to this study. A narrative analysis is highly interpretive; my findings cannot be generalized. Despite the athletes in my sample being allowed to speak and share their stories, their words cannot represent all female athletes. While the heroines in my sample are all

white and currently live in North America, I do not see this as a limitation. I intended to conduct a study that focussed on the lives of privileged athletes. I was concerned with uncovering how this privileged standpoint may be articulated and whether the heroines would recognize how their standpoint impacted their entrance and continuation in sports. I would argue it is important to recognize the unfairness in narratives that position athletic success as a product of individual empowerment. Several intersectional barriers make access to sports challenging. This realization does not mean we should no longer read these stories. A large component of these memoirs is that they inspire the reader, and inspiration can take on many forms. Winning an Olympic medal is no small feat, but it should not be the only indicator of success. We should not undermine the importance of trying. Perhaps the understanding that these athletes come from privileged backgrounds and that this privilege has certainly shaped their success as Olympic athletes can promote change in the sporting world at the grassroots level by focusing on accessibility and inclusion from an intersectional feminist lens.

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