

Being Seen: The Athlete

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Sports is the exhibition of an athlete. The twirling discus thrower of legend, releasing the fast grip of palm and fingers on the two kg (1 kg for women today) disc, didn't realize he was grappling with the great tension in athletics: he wants it to go as far as possible, and he wants to arrest every spectator's eye as his body deals with the laws of momentum. Or, she. Indeed, it is in *her* throat that this tension causes the biggest lump. The male athlete lets the eye's vector bounce off toned muscles; the second (Created) sex lets it bounce off *soul*, penetrating not too easily hair color and outfit and not so seldom the fringes of what British call knickers.

The common tactic is to focus within the dimensions of the court, the field, desiring to let the spectator watch the ball, the lines, the shot—not you. Boy or girl, no athlete will be completely able to deflect attention—few will wish to; but it will, this balance between exhibitionism and concentration, determine the quality of energy one brings to play. It will also determine whether one competes within a team or looks at sports as the show of physique: *my form*. Since every athlete needs to be somewhat the exhibitionist, the primary tool to place correct weights on this scale is coaching.

Every team has a uniform; it is the coach's job to insure that the uniform works, plays well with others. Each athlete will tweak the uniform, if only to reflect size, shape, and attitude; the coach will take it as one index of how much each wants to pull away or stay in the crowd. In practice and in travel, where uniformity is less demanded, dress will be more dynamic, reflecting vital social norms, in town and out of town. The first mistake a coach can make is to assume every other player is not aware of this, particularly on a women's team, particularly when the spectrum is from modest to that new fashion concept, *hot*: rest assured, every player knows the *dress* of every other player.

In basketball, the men's uniform tripled in length, in tennis skirts shortened by a half. In athletics, the politically correct distance between the sexes is never zero: indeed, assume that number is close to its highest value. It may be in the single digits when it comes to male and female coaches, never athletes. I remember sufferings through a period of ballet rehearsals with a friend and being shocked one day to hear the choreographer complaining aloud, in an era (1970's) the rest of us are addressing fifteen-year-old girls as women: "the girls are listening to the music, the boys are daydreaming!" No one in the room hadn't completed adolescence; and no one in the room thought "girls" were anything like "boys," dreaming.

The uniform is the agreement within the team to hide body to show spirit; physical adequacy for the sport comes in a distant third, which is why, it is rumored, the Greeks tossed their discs naked. The matter of positive and negative body image gives the uniform a crucial role in the women's game; it would perhaps be more accurate to say the coach's job is closer to keeping what players wear *looking* more uniform than handing everyone the same top and bottom. The way Player A wears her uniform will affect the way Player B regards her body image, while playing her own match. One only has to

remember early-Agassi to see this phenomenon in (much less so) men. A caveat: the amount of body that sticks out of a uniform—think bathing costumes of the twenties to the bikini—will always be a convention, a fashion—harmless to most. It is worth noting that, deciding the competition to be less an exhibition, organizers of the 2013 Miss World (so-called) Pageant have dunned the bikini: “more about minds and spirits than about bodies.” Referring to the iconic two-piece outfit, this article in *The Times* intimated the worldwide response would be closer to, don’t dun it!

A leading women’s clothing source for sports with the motto “Power of the She,” further defines its spirit thusly: “Create a look that’s uniquely you. And then get out there and show it off.” This not only weights the matter on the side of individuality, but nominates a curious “it” that might worry not a few coaches: *it* is not sport-specific prowess; *it* is not teamwork; *it* is not the firm face of determination; and *it* is not a kindness offered the opponent you just upset, literally and physically. And, when the wearer of this Power outfit loses a close, hard match, *it* will fade to black and leave the coach with a handful of sobbing “showoff.”

Yes, the individual athlete does surely want to be seen—even sorely, but within the “look” of the team: the spectator does not see a team but an individual in play. Yet the ideal aspect of the player is as a mirror, reflecting glory on everyone else in the same uniform, on the coaches, and, far off, on the alma mater—all very far from *amour propre*. We live in a culture, a civilization where female exhibition is an art, a neurosis, a job—each mimicked in the cosmic world of fashion. Although few women participate in it, more than a few notice it: “They [Bachmann and Palin] certainly have intense personalities. But you have to wonder if the secret is that, by political standards, they both look extremely hot. And if it’s their appearance that made them such stars, is that for the benefit of...men or...women” (Gail Collins, *Times*, 5.30.13)?

The firmament of great athletics is a world of “stars” that fall to earth as “personalities”; and a coach is indeed enamored of his or her star, even when they are perched on the shoulders of those lower in the galaxy. But hot, no; the heat comes from intensity, exhibit A is sweat.

A half-century ago a gutsy lady Ms. Moran, once ranked #4 in women’s tennis, wished to have more control over what was at her back when she leaps to convert an overhead midcourt, and decides on something lacy. The 1951 British Parliament’s verdict was “racy”: fast-forward to Anna Kornakova. Her coach, indifferent to fans, would rather have Anna win more than wear less. Oddly enough, the end of that career finds her playing Team Tennis, where she doubtless discovers the pleasures of the game, inside the court, inside the head.