Anatomy Isn’t Destiny: A Multidisciplinary Response to Michael Sokolove’s Warrior Girls

In 2008, a controversial book—Michael Sokolove’s Warrior Girls: Protecting Our Daughters Against the Injury Epidemic in Women’s Sport—was released, along with a companion article which appeared in the May 11 issue of the New York Times Magazine. The premise of the book asserts that “[t]he immutable facts of anatomy and physiology” cause girls to incur significantly more sport injuries (e.g., ACL tears, concussions) than their male counterparts, resulting in what Sokolove terms a female “injury epidemic.” As a response to the underlying premise (and purported facts) of Warrior Girls, the Tucker Center felt it necessary to provide a scholarly critique from relevant academic disciplines. We invited internationally recognized scholars from the U of M in Public Health, Sports Medicine, Sport Psychology and Sociology to read the book and respond independently. Their perspectives—and research findings—follow.

SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE
Martha M. Leake, Ph.D.
Associate Director, Tucker Center

Let me begin by stating that sport injuries and sport injury prevention are very real and important issues—for both girls and boys. However, framing the issue of sport injuries as an inevitable biological difference based on the sex of the athlete is sensationalistic and irresponsible. First, an argument based primarily on biology and physiology altogether ignores that sport performance (and therefore injury) is shaped by social forces such as coaches’ and parents’ beliefs about what it means to be a “female athlete.” Second, this sort of deterministic approach assumes that males, by definition, are naturally (physically) superior to females. In this framework, male athletes are the norm to which females are constantly compared, and any gender differences are therefore constructed as inherent female deficiencies. The consequence of such biology-is-destiny arguments? Professor Cheryl Cooky, Cal State-Fullerton, sums it up best: “Concerns regarding the supposed biological limitations of the female body to withstand rigorous athletic competition have historically served to justify restricting girls’ and women’s access to sport.”

Though Sokolove does indicate that we should also be concerned about sport injuries males sustain, rarely, if ever, are books published devoted to the negative consequences of sport participation on the health and well-being of boys and men. Interestingly, a search for a similar book or article on the “epidemic” of male sport injuries yielded nothing, despite published research which indicates that NFL players’ life expectancy is 15-20 years lower than the general American male population and that many suffer ill effects from playing professional football, including obesity, heart disease, chronic pain and crippling arthritis.

The anatomy-is-destiny perspective also ignores the reality that some female athletes are stronger, have better motor skills, are more flexible, better motor skills, are more

Letter from
the Director

If you’re like me, you became an Olympics fanatic this past August—soaking in the amazing performances of Dara Torres and Natalie Cookhilin in swimming, Nastia Liukin and Shawn Johnson in gymnastics, Sonya Richards and Allyson Felix in track, and many talented athletes competing in basketball, soccer, softball and volleyball. The Tucker Center applauds their accomplishments and basks in the glory of their successes.

To celebrate the Olympics, we are excited to announce the theme of our Fall Distinguished Lecture: “Minnesota Female Olympians: Stories, Experiences & Inspirations.” Professor Doug Hartmann will frame the social and historical context of the Games and then moderate a panel of Olympians with Minnesota roots—Janis Klecker, marathon in Barcelona (1992), Carrie Tollefson, 1500 meters in Athens (2004); and Shani Marks, triple jump in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Though there’s clearly much to honor about personal bests and medal performances, media images continue to reinforce stereotypes about the role and significance of elite female athletes. Coverage of women’s events paled in comparison to men’s during prime time, and stories focused less on women’s athletic accomplishments than on motherhood, skimpy outfits in beach volleyball, and their age (the title on a Sports Illustrated article featuring Dara Torres was “One for the Aged”).

In light of these persistent and pervasive stereotypes, it is not too surprising that a new book has recently appeared on bookshelves across the nation—Warrior Girls by Michael Sokolove (following a cover story in the New York Times Magazine last spring). Sokolove implores: “Everyone wants girls to have as many opportunities in sports as boys. But can we live with the greater rate of injuries they suffer?” The author perpetuates the essentialist argument that male athletes are superior to female athletes based on the so-called biological imperative that females are physically weaker, more vulnerable, and more prone to injury.

The Tucker Center asked scholars from varying academic disciplines to respond to these age-old and troubling arguments. Nicole LaVoi begins with a sociological perspective, followed by critiques from Public Health (Toben Nelson), Sports Medicine (Steve Stovitz and Liga Arrendt), and Sport Psychology (Diane Wiese-Bjornstal). We encourage you to offer your own perspective on Warrior Girls by logging onto the Tucker Center Web site, www.tuckercenter.org.
The Tucker Center attracts outstanding students from across the country to come to the U of M and receive a first-rate educational and research experience. Our mission could not be better illustrated than by the four undergraduates who worked in the Tucker Center this summer. Two of the interns, Terrence Jordan and Jill Haom, were part of the U of M Ronald E. McNair Scholars cohort—a program designed to provide minority, disabled or low-income undergraduate students the research skills necessary to gain admission to and successfully complete their graduate study. Jordan, a Kinesiology major, worked with project mentors Heather Maxwell and Nicole LaVoi on a media project titled “Racial Representations of Women’s and Men’s Intercollegiate Basketball Coverage on ESPN.com.” This fall, Jordan began his Master’s program in Sport Psychology at Georgia Southern in Statesboro, GA.

Haom begins her senior year as a U of M Kinesiology major and works as a Program Assistant in the Department of Recreational Sports. Under the guidance of project mentors Chelsey Thul and LaVoi, Haom worked on the study “Unequal Opportunities, Unequal Outcomes: The Physical Activity of East African Girls,” which was funded by the Melpomene Institute for Women’s Health Research. And Haom finished their summer research assistantships by presenting their research at a University-wide McNair Scholars poster session last August. Haom was also one of five McNair Scholars selected to present their research at the 2008 National McNair Research Conference this October in Delavan, Wisconsin.

Our other two interns arrived at the Tucker Center from outside the U of M. Erin Morris is a senior majoring in Sociology with a Sport Studies minor at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. Morris’ interest in Sport Sociology is fueled by her passion for playing and coaching hockey, as well as her experiences as a youth soccer referee. Sarah Hammond, a Psychology major with a minor in Sports Psychology, is in her last year of study at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. After completing an internship at the St. Paul Children’s Hospital Exercise Medicine Clinic, Hammond’s interest in studying the impact of sport and exercise on children’s overall health and well-being led her to seek out the Tucker Center. Both Morris and Hammond worked with LaVoi on qualitative data analysis pertaining to the emotional (e.g., angry) responses of parents whose children are involved with youth sports.

The Tucker Center congratulates and applauds the work of these four young scholars who gained valuable experience and greatly contributed to our research endeavors this summer! For more information about internship opportunities, contact Dr. Nicole LaVoi, Associate Director of the Tucker Center, at nmlavo@umn.edu or (612) 626-6055.

Terrence Jordan

Jill Haom

Erin Morris

Sarah Hammond

RESEARCH UPDATES

2008 TUCKER CENTER SUMMER INTERNS: UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH DONE RIGHT!

I usually guard against chauvinism in the context of Olympic sports. But I’ve lived in Minnesota long enough now that I couldn’t help but feel a certain degree of Gopher Pride when athletes with connections to our state and university had their moments on the global stage in Beijing. The fact that so many of these athletes were women—Lindsey Berg, Nicole Branagh, and Shani Marks among them—also got me thinking about how gender plays into nationalism, human rights and globalization. These are the issues I’ve been puzzling over since returning from the second of my two recent trips to China.

Women (and gender) stood out at the Beijing Games in a variety of ways. For example, for the first time in Olympic history, American women won as many medals—53 according to the New York Times—as American men. (Four of the 110 U.S. medals were in mixed gender sports such as equestrian). Needless to say, these results underscore once again the success of Title IX and of the larger emphasis on gender-neutral terms, the distinctive roles of women and men in constituting nations and national identity are never far from the surface. What role do U.S. sportswomen play in the construction of our American national identity and pride? What role will women athletes around the world play as gender and national identities shift and change in an increasingly complex, global world? These are just a few of the ideas and questions we will be highlighting at the Tucker Center Distinguished Lecture on October 22. I hope you will join us and our three distinguished panelists that evening. We look forward to hearing your ideas and questions as well.

Doug Hartmann is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and is a Tucker Center Affiliated Scholar. His research examines race and ethnicity; sports; popular culture; and contemporary theory.

GUEST COLUMN: DOUG HARTMANN

Beijing 2008: Olympic Nationalism & the Role of Gender

To highlight the contributions of female coaches and athletes at Beijing, “by the numbers” analysis provides some interesting results. Data released by the USOC indicate that 26% (11 of 43) of all head coaches of women’s teams were female, while female athletes comprised 47% (76 of 585) of all athletes representing the United States. The U.S. team won 110 medals, including 36 gold medals. Overall, female athletes earned 48% (53 of all U.S. medals—15 gold, 23 silver and 15 bronze. This percentage includes 27 gold medals for the beach volleyball, soccer, basketball and women’s eight rowing teams, and individual golds for gymnast Shawn Johnson, swimmer Natalie Coughlin and hurdler Dawn Harper.

Such accomplishments provide ample evidence that sportswomen compete—and succeed!—at the most elite levels of international competition. But they also indicate that more work needs to be done in terms of increasing the number of women head coaches at all levels of competition. For example, at the intercollegiate level nationwide, 42.8% of women’s teams are represented by female head coaches. For additional information pertaining to the employment trends of female coaches in intercollegiate sports, see Vivian Acosta and Linda Carpenter’s 2008 report at webpages.charter.net/womeninsport.

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DID YOU KNOW?
KUDOS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Honors & Awards
• Heather Maxwell and Jens Omli successfully defended their Ph.D. dissertations in May, and Chelsey Thul (née Roed) completed her Masters degree in April.
• Omli received a prestigious 2-year INMHE traineeship at the U of M Institute of Gerontology, and is currently the sole student researcher working on psycho-physiological outcomes for youth sport participants. She will be mentored by internationally recognized scholars Dante Cicchetti and Nicki Crick.
• Thul and Erin Becker each received a 2008-09 Eleezer Lægger Scholarship, an award which provides opportunities for students to meet their educational and career goals.

Scholarly Activities
• Nicole LaVoi, Maureen Weiss, and Wiese-Bjornstal delivered a panel presentation titled “Physical Activity as a Context for Youth Development” last May. The presentation was part of The Applied Research Collaborative on Youth Development’s Inquiry to Impact Series.
• Mary Jo Kane presented results from the Women’s Sport Foundation Media Project, “The Portrayal of Female Athletes in the Media: Does Sex Really Sell?” to AP sports editors in Minneapolis at their annual convention in June.
• Kane will also deliver a distinguished lecture, “Media, Gender and Sport in the 21st Century,” as part of the School of Arts & Sciences’ Institute at Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT, in October.
• Weiss will deliver an invited presentation, the Jo Safrit Lectureship, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in October.
• Weiss, Jennifer Bhalla, Nicole Bolter, and Melissa Price presented two research papers at the annual conference of the North American Society for Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA) in Niagara Falls last June. They presented their study from prior research on the development through participation in The First Tee program—“Life skills, youth development, and sport participation: Retention effects over a one-year period;” and “Lessons learned and core values adopted in a sports-based youth development program: A qualitative longitudinal study.” Price and Weiss also presented a paper at NASPSPA on their study of peer leadership among female adolescent athletes, “Peer leadership in sport: Characteristics, psychological reactions, and enactment.”
• Buyse gave an invited presentation at the Minnesota Recreation & Park Association (MRPA) conference in Brainerd in September titled “Perceptions of Women as Leaders.”

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The Tucker Center celebrates the participation and performance of female athletes at all levels—and this Fall we are honored to acknowledge a very elite group in our midst! The 2008 Distinguished Lecture will feature a trio of Minnesota’s finest female athletes—track & field Olympians Janis Klecker, Carrie Tollefson and Shani Marks.

Janis Klecker competed in the 1992 Olympic marathon in Barcelona, Spain—the same year she won the Olympic Trials. A native of Edina, and an alumnae of the U of M, Klecker is a five-time qualifier for the Olympic Trials, a Twin Cities Marathon champion and winner of countless other races. Such outstanding achievements have earned her a place in the U.S. Track & Field Minnesota Hall of Fame. Currently, Klecker holds the women’s world record for the 50K, a record she has held for over 25 years.

Carrie Tollefson began her career as a distance runner while growing up in Dawson, Minnesota. She was a 13-time Minnesota State High School Champion in both cross country and track & field. But her unprecedented achievements were just beginning. At Villanova, Tollefson continued her winning ways when she became a five-time NCAA Champion and 12-time All-American. In the 2004 Olympics held in Athens, Greece, Tollefson competed in the 1500m race after winning the Olympic Trials.

Shani Marks, a native of Apple Valley, was a three-time All-American triple jumper and NCAA runner-up while competing for the U of M. Marks is also a two-time defending national champion in the indoor and outdoor triple jump, the current Olympic Trials champion, and just represented the United States in the triple jump at the Beijing Olympics. She is currently in her fourth season as a volunteer track & field coach for the U of M.

The performances of Olympic athletes inspire, captivate and pull at our heartstrings. But as we all know, the Olympics are not just about medals and wins and losses. They occur within a set of geopolitical issues related to gender, race, class, nationalism, capitalism and consumerism. To provide context for this complex set of issues—along with acknowledging the accomplishments of our amazing Minnesota athletes—University of Minnesota Professor of Sociology, Doug Hartmann, will provide a critique of the Olympics in general and the Beijing Olympics in particular. Last May, Hartmann co-taught “Beijing Olympics: Sports and Globalization,” a course for which his students travelled to Beijing to gain some first-hand knowledge of “history in the making.” Following his remarks, Hartmann will moderate a discussion with our featured Olympians where we will learn about their life histories, experiences and inspirations.

The Tucker Center is honored to host an evening that is sure to be stimulating, enlightening and inspirational. Please join us in celebrating the athletic achievements of some of Minnesota’s most accomplished female athletes.

To learn more about the event, go to our Web site at www.tuckercenter.org.

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FALL 2008 DISTINGUISHED LECTURE

“Minnesota Female Olympians: Stories, Experiences & Inspirations”

Wednesday, October 22, 2008, 7:00-9:00 pm
Hubert H. Humphrey Center
University of Minnesota West Bank Campus
Free and Open to the Public