

# DYKE DYNAMOS

## Women in Sports

By Dorothy Kidd

"It seemed really natural to me. Going into the boards for the puck, I was supposed to be checking her—aggressive and proud reflexes I had learned from a childhood of playing ice hockey with the boys. But grabbing her in a hug seemed more natural, and I felt more like kissing her than tearing away to send the puck up to my forward."

It was the first winter I had ever played sports in an all-women's group. Through a childhood of play with my brothers and the local boys, I had learned how to defend my position well enough to put the boys off their game, and any scheme they might have to get rid of me, the only girl. But playing with women was very different. There was less fear of getting hurt, of crying when you did,

being female, only the opposite.

Since that magical winter morning on an outdoor rink in Toronto's east end, I have played and worked with many other women who are redefining what it means to be female, and also helping to restructure sport. You can read evidence of this growing movement in the recent body of sport herstory and analysis by women and some men. But much of it is not recorded or recognized. It is more of a folk history, informed by the large numbers of women participating in a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional physical activities. Some are from the established sport circles, while others are re-entering after an adolescence or adulthood alienated from sport and from control of their own bodies. Nor is it a

number of lesbian and heterosexual women about their involvement in sport and their thoughts on lesbianism and sport. More recently, I spoke to five women from across the country, from two large centres and two small ones. They spoke of their fears and problems, and also of the ways women are challenging patriarchal assumptions in sport and exerting a new autonomy. They also made it clear that the long-standing division between women who identify as "feminists" and those who identify as "into sports" is narrowing.

Women from both groups helped to form the two all-women outdoor clubs in Canada. A pioneer in its field, the Vancouver Women's Outdoor Club's emphasis is on sharing skills in a non-competitive atmosphere, helping women to become strong and capable, independent of men. The Club continues to attract new members because of its record of helping women gain the confidence to use their bodies in ways they may never have done before. This has sometimes caused male bystanders to react with disbelief that women are able to overcome the physical challenges of the wilderness.

The Club is not a lesbian-only group, but it includes lesbians. Their constitution includes a clause against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Lesbianism is also a subject of discussion on outdoor trips, and it has seldom been a source of conflict. One woman I spoke to felt comfortable about not having to identify herself one way or the other. She also saw a strong value in getting to know other women by doing a task together, not in the more awkward situation of cruising or being cruised at the bar.

Her words were echoed by Ellen Agger, a member of a similar group called WOODS in Toronto. "The social aspect is really exciting, it's a healthy way to get together, with a building, growing approach." Womyn in the Outdoors is now two years old, and describes itself as a group of "womyn-identified womyn who are active in sharing outdoor skills and experiences."

While it is not an all-lesbian group, it is definitely a place where lesbians can be comfortably "out", for many closeted women perhaps the only such space in their lives. Ellen contributed, "Any time we're out gives us strength to be out in other situations. And it also gives me a sense of power in realizing that there are more lesbians everywhere than I can possibly know."

Their feminist roots show in their dedication to providing a social alternative to the bar and club scene. Trips are drug and alcohol-free. (While this is an unwritten rule of the Vancouver club, one member told me it was probably because of the greater risk of physical danger in the BC outdoors.) Agger, herself a long-time activist, spoke of the spin-offs from groups like WOODS. "Women can gain a lot of skills in organizing and networking that they can use in political work. Groups like this challenge the fact that we're not supposed to get together."

The challenge for women-directed programmes is not restricted to the outdoor clubs. Sandi is a rower who now coaches women in a prairie university. She's suc-

cessfully fought to form a women-only team over the objections of the male head coach. A year later, he's accepted the women's autonomy, and Sandi feels very good about the program which she's established on "feminist principles". In contrast to her own experience as an athlete, she's been able to set up a nurturing dynamic between herself and the athletes. While competition is important, it's not between team members, and the higher achievers help the others to improve. Many of the women have joined because of the strong team feeling. "When you get up at 5:30 every morning to practice, there's a definite bonding that goes on."

Sandi also suggests that women are "challenging the patriarchy by learning new skills and pushing ourselves to the limit. Rather than only being supportive of the male-defined system, which everybody knows is rotten, women are learning to take risks and develop more co-operative programs."

They may have won the right to run their own program, but the smaller size of her community has acted against lesbian visibility. "Lesbianism is the one last hold out; it's an underlying current in sport, but very few lesbians are as out as women in Vancouver. The women who I coach know me and my lover, but it's not a lesbian scene. It's still a very male-defined experience. I've never encountered discrimination as a lesbian perhaps because I sidestep it, I'm so out that it doesn't matter."

Her views echo those of many other women I have spoken to who find visibility a luxury they cannot afford. The fear of losing jobs, children, friends or family, and in many places the fear of violence are very powerful censors. In sports, where the automatic assumption is of lesbianism, the taboo weighs very heavily. The network that Agger spoke of forming already exists, intersecting college, recreational and Olympic teams across the country. But it is an underground with a very closely guarded membership roll. Among some, the secret is kept as a point of honour, perhaps in the same way women often proudly keep their personal suffering private.

Among others the secrecy is just accepted as a fact of life. Sally plays a field sport in an eastern city. Together since the mid-seven-



Support at the finish of a gruelling first marathon—26 miles

or of making a mistake and proving them right about trying to exclude you. And there was the added emotional bond of being physical with other women, safe to be direct in your play and your support.

I had stumbled on another strong network of women. Coming out in the feminist movement, I had learned some things about emotional bonding between women. Collective political actions coupled with intense group discussions and one-to-one conversations had led me to understand my commonality with other women, and our need to work together for social change. The added bonus had been my discovery of the sexual attractiveness of strong, powerful women.

But I was missing something. The rough physical play of my childhood had given me a lot of energy and a strong sense of self. Sport with women presented the potential of reclaiming that physical self and integrating it with my developing female identity. For, like many other women, I'd grown up with the label "tomboy", considering myself special because of it. I had opted for the higher-valued patriarchal attributes of strength, aggressiveness and single-mindedness, fully appreciating I was acting outside the norm. But it was not the pride of

unified, well-organized movement, but instead an informal network ranging across activity, class, race and across the country.

Right in the middle of this emerging self-definition is the subject of lesbianism and sport. For as long as sport and maleness are equated, regardless of their sexual orientation, sportswomen are suspect. The activities of "tomboys" are condoned until adolescence when they are expected to give them up for the more serious pursuit of a male partner, or a career. Women who continue after adolescence have to challenge the traditional stereotypes, or spend much of their time proving just how traditional they can be. There are lesbians among the rebels and among the apologists.

The growing number of women in sport activities has meant a lessening of some of this pressure. The market has seized on women's desire to become fit and in control of their own bodies and created all sorts of "feminine" sports attire, and disco-exercise options. "You too can now look great in a new set of muscles designed by Nautilus." But the taboo against lesbianism remains strong whenever women get together in teams or clubs, with and increasingly without, male leadership.

In the last few years, I have spoken to a



BETSEY CAREY

A member of "The Salukis" a lesbian softball team tries for a homer.

ties, most of the team met at university and jointed the team as a way to stay in shape. After a few seasons of easy victories based on their athletic superiority, they lost to another lesser-skilled but better-prepared team. Since then they take the game much more seriously and practise or play at least four times a week.

Since becoming more committed to the game, they have recruited skilled players outside of their own social circle. The original core of gay women remains, but they are not out to the rest of the team. This has caused some problems, especially when the straight women have wanted to socialize and have felt excluded from the jokes and the evening plans. Sally thinks it also led to the male coach cutting a veteran player at the spring try-outs because she brought her "openly gay" friends to watch. While hoping that more women will get into coaching she feels, that until then, they have to be grateful for their coach, who is "the best in the league".

This commitment to excellence also separates them from the other team in the



Jane on a break-away.

JEANETTE FROST

league which has several gay players. The other team's approach is far more social. They practise less and spend more time drinking together afterwards. Sally also thinks another of the differences is the larger number of stable couples on her



BETSEY CAREY

team. She spoke very proudly of taking a newer team member with them to a local bar. This young woman commented afterwards that all the gay women seemed pretty happy in couples with no bickering or fighting among them. Their role modelling was so good she thought she'd give it a try.

Life away from the team is not so easy. Sally spoke of her fears of losing her job at a very conservative institution. She is worried about the impact of a new gay friend joining her at her workplace this year, and described being upset by snide remarks from another team's members about the "gay team".

The derisive name calling from other teams is common in stories I have heard from lesbians across the country. Sometimes it has ended in fights on the field or ice rink. But lesbians are beginning to take back their names. One member of a Vancouver soccer team accepted being called "a dyke" as a compliment. And on the Toronto softball team, the Salukis, that kind of attack was an impetus to their improvement and championship last year. Team coach Gayle Waddell said, "the team set out to show the league they were a bunch of proud lesbians who could play excellent ball".

When told by the league president there was to be no "close-dancing" at their victory banquet, the Salukis turned up in their best suits, some complete in pink tuxedos, top hats and tails. "We weren't hiding in the closet, we had won the championship, why couldn't we be ourselves at the banquet." The evening ended with everyone having a good time.

Reacting to homophobia was not the major reason for the Saluki's recent success. They are a very different ball club now than in their first seven years. They used to be more like the other team in Sally's league, the competition after the game to "see how many beers you could drink" was as important as the baseball. There was also a never-ending round-robin of relationships which upset the morale of the club. Waddell explained, "You can't help but get closer on a team, and some of them hadn't had a chance to get close to women anywhere else. Here was a good opportunity."

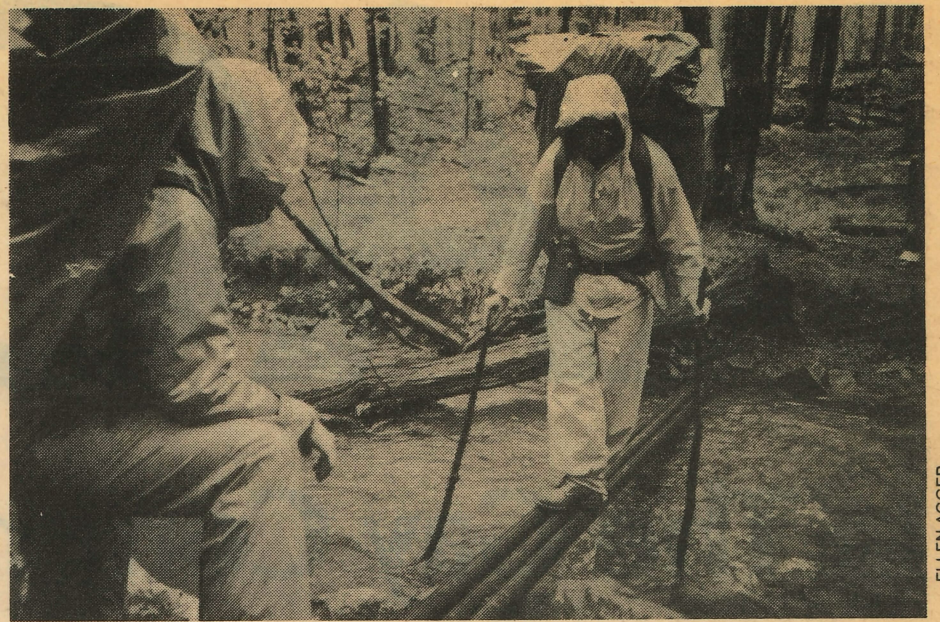
But the initial excitement of "getting

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physical" that I had experienced playing hockey has now developed to a greater level on the Salukis. The transition has not been entirely smooth. But Gayle says this is the first time she knows that a softball team has been run as a collective, an approach that combines "feminist politics" with Gayle's own Senior "A" sports experience. Everyone is there to have fun, but not at the expense of their commitment to the team. On the field, their new discipline has meant no more player arguments with the umpire, no more physical fights, and most importantly, a greater appreciation of everyone's individual play, including those on the opposing teams.

"The drinking is still there, but after the game we all sit down, talk about it and the good plays we each made." The lovers' triangles will also probably continue, but now there is a commitment by team members to consider their impact on the team. "If it causes a blow-up for the team, it's a team responsibility." As Sandi said, when women are willing to take risks and do things that have never been done before, they're well rewarded.

My own experience of this mixing of the feminist and sport traditions occurred last



ELLEN AGGER

Women's backpacking trip.

summer when our Vancouver soccer team went to the first Gay Olympic Games in San Francisco. A composite team of some long-term athletes and women from the "women's community", it proved to be a stormy union. Unlike the Salukis, we had no group contract about how the team would be run whether for fun or to win, who would make decisions and how, and especially who would play and how often. The resulting conflict between the sports-women's authoritative coach and the desires of individual players simmered through the month long training period and erupted at half-time of the championship game. The fifteen of us came away with silver medals and a lot of unresolved tensions about the nature of sport and bonding between women.

Those tensions were offset by the powerful experience of the Olympic Games. Forty per cent of the more than 1,500 athletes were women. It was a unique opportunity to celebrate our gayness and physicality with women and men from all over the world, through a week-long series of sports

nect the Vancouver team and San Francisco to this day.

One sobering year later, some of the same problems of lesbians everywhere still remain. For many lesbians in sports, it is still an environment of fear and self-censorship, of taunts of "lesbian", of losing your job, your children, your friends. The problems of alcoholism and broken hearts continue with few other recourses to support. While more women are learning how to coach and develop a more co-operative approach, there are many more teams where authoritarianism and favouritism reign.

But the climate within the subculture is also changing. New women are joining, bringing numbers, energy and organizational experience. Events like the Gay Olympics are providing positive images of lesbians in sport and the patriarchal excesses of sport itself are being challenged by lesbian and heterosexual women and many gay and heterosexual men. There is a lot to be changed, but there is also a growing number who are organizing to change it.

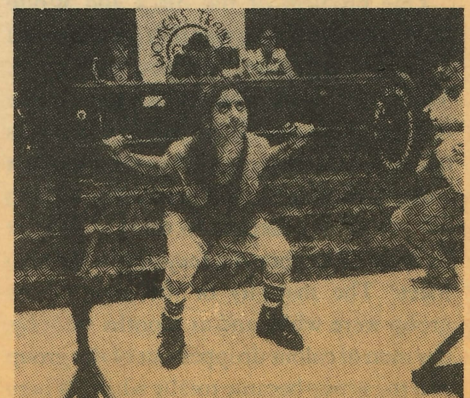
sometimes  
our bodies move  
in tandem  
sometimes  
in unison  
running  
swimming  
cycling  
beside each other  
knowing our own physical pleasure  
is doubled  
playing together

stretching, lunging, kicking  
every muscle  
in emotion  
creating  
a surge of  
physical power  
sexual joy  
and  
subversion.

and social times. It also proved to be a time to discuss how to run a team co-operatively, combining the strengths of both traditions in a good experience for everyone.

The Games culminated in a closing ceremonies that brought together some of my strongest emotions about being a lesbian in sport. Each team entered the stadium amidst wild hoots of applause from the ten-thousand strong body, and when the last group arrived, all of us were on our feet cheering ourselves and our solidarity. The camaraderie was based on our common struggle against the stultifying roles that mangle each of our personalities, whether as women or as men. As the political speeches ended, there was a joyful celebration of our sexual energy in a mass jump-up.

The Gay Olympics represented all that is subversive about the lesbian experience in sport. Women challenged traditional stereotypes of passivity in displays of raw physical power and energy. There was a lot of co-operative learning between team members and athletes on other teams, defying the myth that women cannot teach and learn from each other. Strong emotional relationships were formed that intercon-



Shirley Gutierrez

GAY SPORTS