

# IV

## *Ladies*

## INTRODUCTION *Athletic, Artistic, or Just Plain Perverse*

Before I started figure skating as an adult, my primary take on standards of femininity in figure skating revolved around a pair of terms that commentators throw around for female skaters: *athletic* and *artistic*. As many people have noticed, the terms frequently function as codes akin to *butch* and *femme*. “Athletic” female skaters, especially opposed to “artistic” skaters, may be identified as such for stunts beyond what most female skaters can do—Tonya Harding and Midori Ito, two top “athletic” skaters, could land triple axels. “Athletic” also implies that a skater’s prowess is achieved at the expense of femininity. Athletic skaters, it seems, hurl themselves up and around in undisguised displays of brawn, without refinements directing attention from muscled labor to the feminine grace that “artistic” skaters exhibit.<sup>1</sup>

This contrast between athletic and artistic is dubious on many levels. Why should extreme athletic accomplishments, or willing displays of strength, be gendered masculine? Using them as an exit marker for femininity is also related to using them as an exit marker for femaleness and one extremely troubling, unjust consequence: sex verification testing of elite athletes in women’s sports. (I return to the topic in part 6.) Besides, the judgment “athletic” as opposed to “artistic” has been applied especially to female skaters of color (Ito and also the dark-skinned Surya Bonaly) and/or with visible lower-class roots (Harding), suggesting raced and classed feminine ideals that not all skaters can come to embody.

Regardless, why should either artistry or athleticism performed by women require a particular display of femininity for maximum support, scoring, or even participation?<sup>2</sup> Such notions hurt athletes not only in figure skating, famous for subtle or direct pressure to conform to gender ideals, but also in numerous other sports. Female bodybuilders have faced judging standards that reward them for quitting short of their best muscle-developing effort.<sup>3</sup> Throwers competing in women’s track and field may feel pressure to counter the masculinity associated with the

massive shoulder and arm muscles required to compete at elite levels, even visibly wearing feminine makeup when they throw. This is not to say that throwers only wear makeup as a ruse. Jayne Caudwell cautions us to remember that some athletes presenting as feminine in masculine-coded sports do so because they prefer feminine expression in general, not to deflect prejudice labeling them masculine or labeling them queer because masculine; some feminine-expressed jocks happily identify as queer, too.<sup>4</sup> But for throwers who identify as butch, or otherwise unfeminine, both conformity and refusal to do so have costs. Besides, as one elite thrower, Keelin Godsey, pointed out to me, throwers of all genders ought to be getting credit for grace the way figure skaters should be getting credit for strength. The two sports, we realized in conversation, have a lot in common. In both, people twirl around, balance, and utilize strength. Yet figure skaters are viewed as pretenders to the title of athlete while throwers are characterized as hurling lumberers, like the football players, such as Emmitt Smith or Jerry Rice, who surprise viewers when they shine on *Dancing with the Stars*.

### *Not Me?*

In short, the sources and effects linked to athletic versus artistic reek. I know that. But that knowledge is mixed up for me with my own pleasures in gender. At figure skating, hockey, public skating, and skating class, skaters engage with movements associated with masculinity or femininity: reveling in them; ignoring or straining against them; aspiring, struggling, or refusing to learn them—all more or less consciously in relation to gender. I can't stand watching gender coercion of any kind: people pushed to butch up, femme out, or skate against their inclinations, gendered or otherwise, to twirl, check, speed, pump their fists, extend their arms, whatever. But I'm entranced by the rest, partly because, simply put, I find both gender contrast and intense interest in gender quite hot. Put differently, I love spectating consensual gender, just as I love participating in it. Skating suits my strong identity as femme, and while I don't want figure skating to require femininity, I experience it, as I've said, as an expression of mine.

That's why, despite my clarity about the foul tinge of the divide between athletic and artistic and my fondness for calling myself an athlete especially when it challenges expectations—yep, a femme jock; yep, the

girl who failed gym class; yep, get over your ideas about skating not being a sport—I was stung, during a group lesson, when the coach, illustrating that skaters have diverse styles and strengths, called me the athletic one and someone else the artistic one. I felt hurt and misunderstood, even though I knew that she intended to compliment characteristics I strive to achieve, and that “athletic” directed to someone my age bears meanings independent of gender about unexpected strength and push. I might, then, have at least been gracious. Instead I protested, anxious to fight off the unwanted label and, more important, the recognition of something that I could not keep denying. In the context of figure skating I frequently fail to register as feminine to people whom I encounter, so much so as to render invisible even the most standard feminine accoutrements. Six years into skating regularly on the same ice, another skater said to me, “Hey, you’re wearing nail polish—I’ve never seen you do that before.” Actually, no one has seen me without nail polish since 1995, when I turned my nails into twenty bright spots of mandatory color to flash at the emotional-wreck-making of the tenure process.

What made my femininity invisible? Was it my skating? I like to think I’m graceful. Was it my clothes? My favored practice garb has what I consider clear feminine markers, like spaghetti straps or scoop necks, and the near constant quality of being form-fitting; I avoid hiding my standard feminine contours of breasts, hips, and waist. What canceled all that out? In queer contexts, especially where butches and femmes are a familiar presence, I can take for granted that my visible feminine curves will be read as a deliberate choice to display femininity in contrast to people who signal a masculine expression by hiding hips and breasts. Maybe the old notion that femmes need butches to make us visible as queer, for people who don’t know how to look, held true in a sports environment where butches were scarce. Or was it more simply my disinclination to practice or perform, at least in solos, in typical skating dresses? Either explanation might figure into how people perceived me in my costume for “Piece of My Heart,” which might not read as feminine if my status as the only female performing a solo in pants outweighed the top’s skinny straps and cut (figure 5). In general, those dropped-waist, flared-skirt numbers are not for me, although I could happily skate daily in more tube-like skirts—the kind that suit derby practice and, outside of rinks or tracks, call for seriously good boots.



5. Illegible gender? Me, with Janis Joplin–ed exhibition hair, skating to “Piece of my Heart” in the Portland Ice Arena’s show, I ♥ Skating. Photograph by dvmsports.com, 2007.

### *Perverse Normalcy*

The following pieces look at the mechanisms, contradictions, exclusions, and effects involved in maintaining gender norms for those skaters who, if they competed, would compete, officially, as “ladies.” “Skaters who would compete as ‘ladies’” may seem like a laborious way to say “female skaters.” But I want to work against taking for granted the use of “lady,” which does not always refer to people of classy refinement who demurely cross their legs. I have noticed, for instance, that if I’m at a restaurant with someone who presents as male, genderqueer, butch, or otherwise masculine and who might also be perceived as female-bodied, the server often pointedly addresses us as “ladies.” It requires interpreting other

clues to discern the server's intention. It could be a bigoted refusal to acknowledge my meal companion's intentional departure from femininity; an affirmation of female masculinities as legitimately female; a nod to our possible status as a nonheterosexual couple; a queer wink of some kind, in the genre of calling gay men "ladies" or "girls"; or a conventional gesture of politeness by someone ignorant or unconcerned that "lady" might not please someone deliberately departing from femininity.

In sports, similarly, "lady" operates in diverse ways. Semiofficial team nicknames using "lady"—like "Lady Rams" or "Lady Yachtmen," to name two jarring results of the convention where I live—bear at least the residue of the notion that women should or do play more delicate, less taxing, versions of sports played by men.<sup>5</sup> Granted, "lady" is far less insulting than the "whole subgenre" of "homophobic and just plain moronic" YouTube videos discussed by Jennifer Doyle that viciously trash women's basketball as hardly being a game.<sup>6</sup> Still, Glenn Jordan, a sportswriter for the *Portland Press Herald*, generally refuses to use "lady" nicknames, calling them "dated and sexist with a hint of condescension."<sup>7</sup> (He also refuses to use official team names with Native American references; in his writing, the Chicago Cubs would thus beat "Cleveland" in the World Series.)

Yet "lady" can work differently, too. Jordan himself makes an exception for the University of Tennessee "Lady Vols," for "Volunteers," because their legendary coach Pat Summitt embraced it to distinguish her championship team from the less successful men. "Lady" also remained firmly within the category of kick-ass at a Maine Roller Derby players' meeting I sat in on. A player praised her teammates as "true ladies" for declining to match an opposing team's dirty tactics at a recent bout. Ladies, by this definition, may flatten someone with legal maneuvers but they don't brawl or start fights. Then there are the e-mails starting with "Hey Ladies" that I routinely receive on a list for women hockey players. Since "ladylike" hardly describes players' on-ice goals, or, uniformly, their off-ice demeanors, I take it as a slightly ironic but polite salutation.

Figure skating has the distinction of using "ladies" both more officially—thus Jordan makes an exception here, too—and more prescriptively than in most other sports, although its bottom-line use to signify "female" is no more prescriptive than any sport dividing athletes into two sexes with the tacit implication that two suffice. Such divisions exclude intersex people as well as trans people at stages of transition labeled offi-

cially in-between by governing bodies controlling their participation in the sport.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that “lady” also signals prevailing desired characteristics of elegant femininity, it also points to barriers, sometimes fundamentally unbreachable, for numerous skaters. These include skaters identifying as females who find “lady” intolerably dissonant and those who aspire to “lady” but lack the resources to acquire or hone the characteristics that, to borrow a classroom term, count for credit. Even people who consider themselves well, or well enough, to be accommodated by the “lady” classification do not simply step into a category that reflects their identities, but may be challenged, defined, and altered by it.

While skating is commonly understood to enforce rigid, often bizarre and archaic, gender rules, the dimensions of the perversity of these rules are not always so obvious. And perverse they often are, in various senses associated with the word. As the pieces in this section suggest, they can be weird, wrong, and hurtful to be slapped with, or crazily pleasing to observe, adopt, or to mess with. The essay titled “Skank or Ballerina? Codes of the Crotch Shot,” takes on one of the most convoluted hypocrisies that affect, if variously, female skaters of all ages: how moves and outfits that involve panty flashing may be considered evidence alternately of skanky classlessness or of athleticism, flexibility, and grace. The following two essays focus specifically on adult skating. They consider first what can be freeing and then what can be confining in feminine norms. In “Cracking the Normative,” I work to decipher how dominant feminine norms in adult skating, which both follow and contradict norms outside the sport, may, for some people and in varied ways, contribute to making adult skating so deeply compelling and enjoyable. In “Oh, Right, Policing Femininity: Nine Inch Nails at Adult Nationals,” I recount my surprisingly painful, and surprisingly surprising, experiences of finding my own femininity possibly censured in figure skating competition. The final essay, “Booty Block: Raced Femininity,” begins with a look at *The Women Who Raised Me*, a memoir by the actor Victoria Rowell that wonderfully illustrates how racial matters factor into all facets of our lives, which nonetheless can never be fully explained by or reduced to them. Using her account of training in ballet to set up key issues, I consider how raced feminine ideals affect skating’s look, standards of excellence, and cast of characters.