The Silence of Great Distance: Women Running Long

Frank Murphy, Kansas City, MI: WindSpirit Press. (469 pages) ($18.95)

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According to the author, this is a work of creative nonfiction about two female long distance runners, Stephanie Herbst and Kathy Ormsby, who competed respectively for the University of Wisconsin and North Carolina State during the 1980s. The lives of these two runners would become intertwined for posterity on the evening of Wednesday, June 4, 1986, during the 10,000 meter event at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championship in Indianapolis, Indiana. Stephanie would run the race and eventually emerge the victor while Kathy, in mid-course, disappeared from the track, ran across a baseball diamond, traveled down New York Street and jumped off a bridge.

The story by itself is deeply troubling. It is force and impact, the incomprehensibility of two young women competing, one finishing the race, the other nearly finishing her life, are arresting to encounter, even if one is familiar with the event. The story is a difficult one to manage, escaping as it does beyond the tidy limits of our frame of reason, accelerating beyond the reach of our fingertips, our collective impulse to intercept and catch Kathy before she takes off in the fateful direction of that bridge.

Murphy does an excellent job of guiding the reader beyond the sheer sad and tragic dimensions that could so easily overcome and overwhelm both the reader and the story. He situates the lives of these two women athletes within a frame that allows for an examination of the complex, unrelenting, and powerful socio-historical forces that shaped the expectations these women entertained for themselves and the expectations others held for them. As one example of how Murphy achieves this, he points out that there is significance to the time period in which these women emerge within the sport of track and field at the college level. By way of context, Murphy constructs a sweeping and purposeful overview of women in long distance running, keying off of several “historical principals” whose experiences become the backdrop against which the Herbst/Ormsby sisterhood is interpreted and understood. One of those “principals” is Doris Brown, who he describes as the “mother of long distance running for women”. As a female athlete in the 1960s, Doris Brown was motivated to run by desire, enjoyment, and an abiding sense of personal dignity, unaided by what we think of today as understanding and supportive parents, uninfluenced by role models, and unpersuaded by scholarship-wielding coaches. In reflecting on Brown’s contribution to women’s running, Murphy observes, “from this distance, it may seem that progress for women was inevitable, but at every step of the way Doris and others who worked with her were cutting a path through deep resistance” (p. 94). Whereas Doris Brown represents a pre-Title IX figure, Mary Decker, in turn, is presented here as a transitional figure, someone whose career spans two eras, one just prior to the adoption of Title IX and the era that would develop in the wake of Title IX.

The usefulness of this historical overview of women’s long distance running becomes clear re-
ative to the author’s conceptualization of the primary characters in this story. He writes, “Stephanie Herbst came to maturity in the middle of history. She was not a person who participated in revolutionary change, because she was born too late for that; but neither was she a person who competed after changes were wrought by revolution were fully absorbed and assimilated, with expectations settled and adjustments made. To understand Stephanie’s time, then, a person looks backward and forward—backward to history and forward to the lessons her generation could teach based on the peculiarity of their experiences.” (p. 37).

In the end, this is a cautionary tale about the lives of women athletes in a post-Title IX, post-modern age. For sport insiders, the shock of this story may have less to do with the idea of a young woman so lost as to leap from a bridge and more to do with the fact that factors that surface as shared influences in the lives of both Stephanie and Kathy, and the legions of other runners who were their contemporaries—perfectionism, performance, pressure—converge to make Kathy’s action comprehensible and comprehensible. Some insight in this regard is gained from the remarks made by Stephanie after learning about Kathy’s leap. Acknowledging the pressure and perfectionism that runners experience, Stephanie expressed not only sympathy for Kathy, but empathy, in the manner of kindred spirits. She said:

The public was [surprised] by what happened, but I don’t think anyone involved in the sport was. People see the glamour of running but that’s not all there is... Any athlete who says they have no idea of the pressures that might have led Kathy to go to such an extreme is probably lying. Anyone holding a collegiate record in a race with other top athletes and facing the possibility of not placing or not keeping the record has to have tons of pressure. It’s a public loss, not a private loss.

The tenuous definition of success that Stephanie makes reference to here, along with the attendant wear and tear such a conception of success exacts on athletes in the form of insecurity, obsessive/compulsive relationships with food and weight, the constant confrontations with shortcomings and strengths left to their owners to be dealt with in private and in plain view, warrants consideration. It is instructive to pause long on the demands placed on Stephanie less than a day after Kathy left the race in which they were both competing, exits the arena and headed out toward an unknown future. The meet continued! Stephanie and the other runners were expected, without missing a beat, to pick up and carry on, to run their best, to value that championship as if nothing had happened to alter their worldview. As if Kathy had not, less than 24 hours previously, been wholly and completely one of them, as if she were not still one of them.

This is a disturbing, important, and provocative book. As such, I believe it should be read widely. As gentle observations, rather than criticisms of the work, there are some vulnerabilities about the book worth noting. First, some may question Murphy’s motivations as a male author writing about female athlete experience. For those disposed to considering women’s sport in light of history, memories surface of other tragic tales that served to discourage or derail women from participating in sport, from the casting of women off cliffs in ancient times as penalty for watching male athletic events to sportswriter John Tunis’s fantastical account of women lying prostrate on the track following the running of the 800 meter event at the 1982 Olympics.