Book Review


The electrifying performance by the United States women’s gymnastics team in the 1996 Olympic Games creates a timely opportunity for a review of Joan Ryan’s book, _Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: The Making and Breaking of Elite Gymnasts and Figure Skaters._ In the wake of the U.S. women’s team victory, thousands of young girls have entered gymnastics training centers across the country. The grace, poise, and public appeal that surrounds gymnastics tends to quickly overshadow the dangerous psychological and physical problems that are often associated with competitive gymnastics and figure skating.

Joan Ryan chronicles the lives of elite gymnasts and figure skaters whose competitive careers have been complicated or cut short by eating disorders, weakened bones, stunted growth, debilitating injuries, deficiencies in self-esteem, abusive parents and coaches, and/or even death. From deep within gyms and ice rinks across America, Ryan, an award winning sports journalist, suggests that the preponderance of “broken bodies and mangled spirits (p. 243)” within America’s elite level gymnasts and figure skaters reflects training and support systems filled with exploitation and abuse.

I found this book to be well written and informative for three reasons. First, its highly accessible textual style was immediately appealing. Ryan draws from anecdotal records and interviews to reproduce the “darker side” of two of America’s most cherished sports. The actual voices of the athletes, coach-
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cs, and parents are heard throughout the book. By avoiding discussions that are heavily laden with theory, information is presented at a level that can be understood by a wide range of readers, including athletes, coaches, parents, and those outside the sporting arena. At the same time, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* extends itself well to deeper levels of critical analysis when read by individuals interested in the sociocultural aspects of sport and physical activity. For example, I have used this book with University students to generate discussion about issues of gender, power, the social construction of meaning, multiple constructions of reality, and the historical and social context of sport.

A center insert of pictures also enhances the accessibility of Ryan’s book. These pictures allow the reader to see, for example, gymnast Christy Hendrich’s whittled body prior to her death from a five year battle with anorexia nervosa and the carefully packaged “ice princess” image of Nancy Kerrigan that made her one of the most highly marketable female athletes in the country.

The second aspect of this book I applaud is the attention Ryan gives to the social complexity of sport. As a part of American culture, gymnastics and figure skating are created and shaped by a variety of factors. It would be erroneous to assume that the rather grim picture of elite gymnastics and figure skating that emerges in *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* is a singlehanded creation. Through the stories of familiar names such as Kathy Johnson, Kristi Phillips, Kim Zmeskal, and Tonya Harding (to name a few), the reader learns how social forces such as class, weight, politics and money, national visibility, and pressure from coaches and parents create a labyrinth that few athletes are able to negotiate without stumbling and breaking. In the introduction to the book, Ryan alludes to the type of social constructed casualties that fill the pages of *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*: