

# COMPETING WOMEN: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY AND NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN ATHENS 2004

Dr. Louise Mansfield

Department of Sport Science, Tourism and Leisure  
Canterbury Christ Church University

Helen Curtis

Department of Sport Science, Tourism and Leisure  
Canterbury Christ Church University

## **Abstract**

The Olympic Games is a cultural medium through which people can identify with the nation. The growth of media sport, reflected in the intensifying relationship between the media and the Olympic Games, has led to the representation of complex and contested textual and visual imagery of racial, national and gendered identities. This paper represents a feminist interpretation of national identity for understanding global sport. We draw on theoretical perspectives on gender, women and sport and the wider literature on feminisms, citizenship and nationalism to discuss media representations of British female Olympic athletes at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. In doing so our work contributes to an understanding of females, femininities, national identifications and global sport.

This paper is part of a wider project that examines media discourse surrounding British Olympic and Paralympic women.athletes. The principal aim here is to discuss selected media representations of Dame Kelly Holmes at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. In doing so, we draw on theoretical perspectives on gender, women and sport as well as the wider literature on feminisms, citizenship and nationalism. Our analytical framework recognises the significance of understanding identity in terms of difference but it specifically harnesses feminist conceptualisations of *intersectionality* and Elias's theories about *identification* in

understanding the relationship between women, national identity and global sporting communities. The article has six sections. First we outline the concepts of state, nation, national identity and nationalism as they have been discussed in the sociology of sport and wider literature. Second we introduce the concepts of difference and intersectionality and discuss how they might be used to shed some light on the significance of gender in understanding women and sport in an international context. The third section illustrates the way that Elias's (process) theory of identification and power dovetails with some feminist accounts of intersectionality that might be fruitful for understanding females, femininities and national identifications in global sport. We provide a brief overview of media discourse analysis; the principle method of study for this paper, in section 4. The final two sections (5 and 6) present a preliminary analysis of intersections of femininity, national identity and race/ethnicity in representations of one British female Olympic athlete; Dame Kelly Holmes, at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

### **National Identity, Media Sport and Gender**

Questions about national identity are of central concern in the sociology of sport and “sport and nationalism are arguably two of the most emotive issues in the modern world”<sup>1</sup>. Sport has developed into a popular cultural medium through which people can identify with the nation<sup>2</sup>. The relationship between sport and national identity is complex and concomitant upon the interplay between the historical developments of nations and states, the multi-various forms of identification with the nation that people experience, and the diverse ways in which identities are constructed and reconstructed in social life. A state exists where there is a form of independent political organization for ruling people and territory<sup>3</sup>. States represent a political organizing unit usually bounded by a defined geographical location providing a foundation for the coincidence between state and nation.

The character of the nation has been subjected to various interpretations including those based on language, ethnicity, geography, religion and common experience<sup>4 5</sup>. We argue that gender is a determining feature of nations, states and national identity and later in this paper we discuss some of the ways that sporting nations are constructed in gender specific ways through media representations of female athletes.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, nations are the “Premier symbol of collectivity and the accompanying sense of national identity”<sup>7</sup>. Nations may emerge and exist without the defining features of a state as is the case in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK). The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Westminster (England) acts as a unitary state governed constitutionally as a single unit but comprising the ‘home nations’ of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The ‘home nations’ represent their collective nations in sports such as football (soccer) and netball even though they are not recognised as nation-states within the United Nations.<sup>8</sup> In some sports and sports events national boundaries are further blurred. At the Olympics/ Paralympics, athletes from Northern Ireland may represent team Great Britain (GB) or team Ireland. In terms of national identification, sports people in the United Kingdom may identify with several very different nations, and thus, experience and express multiple national identities<sup>9</sup>. Shared characteristics of name, territory, public culture, economy, legal rights and duties as well as common historical memories and myths define the ‘ideal’ type of nation.<sup>10</sup> This sense of unity and difference is reflected in feelings of belonging to the nation that is at the core of national identity.

National identity is characterised by an awareness of collectivity in a named population; an “imagined community”<sup>11</sup>. Producing and reproducing a sense of who ‘we’ (the nation) and ‘they’ (other nations) are is somewhat of an “ideological creation”.<sup>12</sup> National identity, then, is constructed through the ‘invention of tradition’; “ a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to

include certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past".<sup>13</sup> Sport, through its literal and symbolic flag waving, emblem bearing, anthem singing and display and glorification of heads of state is one social sphere through which people are exposed to established signifiers of the nation which serve to develop and maintain attachment and loyalty to the nation. Sport is a site for the construction of "complex and powerful nationalist sentiments".<sup>14</sup>

Most research concerned with sport and national identification is about men and male sports. There is a growing body of literature that addresses women's experiences of sport in an international context. The sporting experiences of women from different countries worldwide has been brought to the fore in developing an understanding of the relationships between women, international sporting movements, nation, class, disability, race/ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation.<sup>15</sup> There are also studies that examine media sport, women and national culture, some of which illustrates that media sport may provide a sphere for destabilizing established gender power dynamics in sport and open up a space for "new potential for sporting femininity".<sup>16</sup> The complicated established-outsider gender relations in media sport require further investigation.

We argue here that in promoting the coincidence between nation-state development and national identification, sporting nations produce and reproduce the gendered character of the state. Modern Olympic ideals (Olympism) reflect the history of the state as gendered; one which is predominantly a tool of male dominance and female subordination. There is a link between nationalism and masculinity in the writings of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin who stated: "The average Frenchman's infuriating sense of logic made my friends reproach me: you are working for the adolescent, for the boy...what are you planning to do for the child, for the girl?... Nothing at all, was my answer. They are not going to advance my cause. The reform that I am aiming at is not in the interests of grammar or

hygiene. It is a social reform or rather it is the foundation of a new era that I can see coming and which will have no value or force unless it is firmly based on the principle of a completely new type of education<sup>17</sup>. Coubertin's vision for a new type of education mirrored the principles and practise of physical education of young men taking place in English public schools in the nineteenth century. The characteristics of physical culture that Coubertin espoused were based on a particular version of manliness that included the cultivation of moral values such as courage, chivalry, loyalty, cooperation and fair play as well as physical and mental qualities such as strength, speed and agility and independence and leadership<sup>18</sup>. Manly physical culture, based on the principles of athleticism, was believed to teach men lessons for life and specifically to build discipline and moral virtue that not only represented masculinity but also national character.

### **Sporting Nations and Female Identities: Difference and Intersectionality**

Understanding gendered developments in nation-state formation and the accumulation of political and material resources in part requires work that incorporates women as subjects of research<sup>19</sup>. It also requires work that challenges universalistic, homogenized and white assumptions regarding women and society<sup>20</sup>. The criticism of conceptions of women's identities as unified and stable has led to work that focuses on how women's biographies reflect different social experiences including those connected to race/ethnicity, age, social class, sexuality and disability. In sport, the representation and visibility of individual "media heroines" tends to construct a belief that successful sports women singularly represent all women in terms of national identity and community<sup>21</sup>. The popularisation of the individual sporting heroine, through the development of a global media sport network appears to produce and maintain a universal western image that modern sport provides a system for certain success and financial wealth for those who participate as well as glorifying narrow

definitions of glamorised, stylised and commodified images of femininity<sup>22</sup>. However, female and male identities are multiple, shifting, sometimes contradictory, and sometimes unresolved. Processes of gender identification are variable, problematic and open-ended and the formation of feminine and masculine identities is contingent upon the body as well as historical and geographical contexts. While there is a tendency towards the universalisation and homogenisation of (western) femininity in media sport, growing and intensifying media coverage of sport has led to the representation of complex and contested images of racial, national and gendered identities.<sup>23</sup>

Arguments made against a single explanation of gender identity, and more specifically against the homogenised categories of woman/women have centred on diversity and difference within and between groups of women and on the multifaceted nature of femininity. A concept of difference synonymous with “plurality” and “multiplicity” has been widely accepted in feminist theorising as the foundation upon which to advance knowledge about women’s identities<sup>24</sup>. At the same time as recognising inequality between the sexes scholarship concerned with gender and difference has harnessed the concept in exploring differences *between* women themselves. Difference in this sense suggests diversity in terms of “race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, age and disability *among women*”.<sup>25</sup> Difference can be thought of in terms of experiential diversity. This formulation of difference draws on one of the essential features of feminisms; the centrality of experience and an ‘insider’ or ‘involved’ position in understanding the conditions of being a woman.<sup>26</sup> It is a view that illustrates that the main sites of subordination and oppression are different for different women and recognises that there is no fixed and universal category of gender or of race/ethnicity, national identity, religion, age, social class or disability. Rather, there are differences between and within groups of women from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Some are critical of the standpoint perspective connected with experiential difference because

it embraces a culturally relativist view of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> A conceptualisation of difference has emerged from such critics who argue that while experience is central to understanding gender relations it must be understood as constructed at various, yet interdependent levels. Individual biography or lived experience or experience at the level of the subject is intertwined with the ways that people are positioned within systems of power in the wider social world in which they live; at the level of institutions.<sup>28</sup> Considered in this way, difference provides a sensitising concept for understanding the similarities and tensions in women's lives and the consequences of those complexities for the collective experiences of women.

A separate, distinct way of thinking about difference is rooted in the work of postmodernist researchers who argue that difference is central to peoples lives and that deconstructing and understanding discourses of difference is important in advancing knowledge about the multiplicity of voices and fragmentation of self and meaning in a postmodern world. There appears to be a convergence of ideas about difference in these seemingly oppositional positions of difference-as-experience and postmodern thinking about difference in that they share an emphasis on heterogeneity, opposition to grand theory, a challenge to binary opposites such as male/female, an approach to the deconstruction of singular, universal meanings of such terms as man, woman and patriarchy, a focus on multiple identities and selves and suggestions for alternative and emancipatory aspects of women's lives<sup>29</sup>.

In more recent feminist work the concept of intersectionality has developed in understanding the complexities of gendered social life. Intersectionality approaches intend to move beyond studying differences between men and women and diversities within groups of women and men as well as to escape from the "cul-de-sac of disconnected, deconstructing differences".<sup>30</sup> Intersectionality addresses the ways that social relations of race/ethnicity, class and gender are intertwined and contingent upon networks of power that produce and

reproduce complex processes of domination, resistance and negotiation<sup>31</sup>. That said, it has been argued that the concept is limited by somewhat narrow methods of research that remain bound by disciplinary approaches<sup>32</sup>. Thus, there is a need to “overcome disciplinary boundaries based on the use of different methods in order to embrace multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality”.<sup>33</sup> The media discourse analysis used in this study offers one approach to exploring intersectionality that arguably transcends theoretical discipline boundaries.

The concepts of difference and intersectionality have been variously employed by feminists seeking to understand the relationships between gender, race/ethnicity, class, colonialism, imperialism and nationality and nationhood. But conceptualisations of difference and intersectionality are not without their critics. It has been highlighted, for example, that a postmodern approach to difference is characterized by a masculinist “political conservatism” that has little evaluative potential and is unable to effect change. Furthermore, the difference-as-experience approach risks reinforcing us/them binaries in which the assumed norms are white, middle-class, able-bodied, western and heterosexual.<sup>34</sup> Such a view serves to construct ‘other’ women as black, lower class, non-western or lesbian. An emphasis on difference also tends to exclude experiences that women share which are central to women’s identities because the “endless possibilities for diversity” that tend to be created around approaches to difference sends feminisms spiralling into a liberal pluralist paradigm making it impossible to discern the inequalities of power that are central to understanding women’s lives<sup>35</sup>. Thus, “to focus on ‘difference’ alone runs the risk of masking the conditions that give some forms of ‘difference’ value and power over others”.<sup>36</sup> Criticisms have also been levied at the use of the concept of intersectionality, not least by the Black Feminist writers who pioneered it. Intersectionality research has been criticised because it implies a relativist position in claims for limitless types of oppression. For example, it is argued that a focus on race, class and



gender at an individual level reinforces “traditional liberalism” and “apolitical postmodernism” because it fails to account for the hierarchical characteristics and intersecting mechanisms of power in the race/class/gender triad<sup>37</sup>. Questions are, therefore, raised about the ways that intersectionality are being used to weaken its potential in understanding women’s lives by individualising and liberalising issues of power. For example, feminist educational researchers have questioned the divisive nature of Black Feminist scholarship which risks reinforcing fixed, binary and oppositional ideas about women, subverts the idea of women’s choice, and thus, loses the emancipatory potential of feminist politics.<sup>38</sup>

In order to further an understanding of women’s experiences and identities, and representations of women in the media, analysis of difference must incorporate proper consideration of wider social relations of power that turn difference into systems of inequality and subordination. Important too is analysis that recognises and explores problems of identity formation in terms of intersecting levels of identification characterised by both difference and sameness. Elias’s ideas about identity and identification may have something to offer here.

### **Identification, Networks of Power and Established-Outsider Relations**

For Elias it is helpful to our understanding of identity to think of a person as in constant motion; being in “process” rather than simply going “through a process”<sup>39</sup>. The argument that self-images and we-images are always constructed and reconstructed over time, in specific geographical locations and within groups of interdependent people provides a basis for conceptualising identity as always multi-layered.<sup>40</sup> The precise characteristics of identification will vary according to the number and type of “interlocking layers in a society that are interwoven into a person’s habitus”<sup>41</sup>. For example, a woman may be Lancashire-born, Welsh and European and also part of a global network of international mediasport

personnel. Habitus, “the modes of conduct, taste, and feeling which predominate among members of particular groups” is importantly tied to the notion of identity defined as;

a higher level of conscious awareness by members of a group, some degree of reflection and articulation, some positive or negative emotional feelings towards the characteristics which members of a group perceive themselves as sharing and in which they perceive themselves as differing from other groups.<sup>42</sup>

In media representations of women in sport, the production and reproduction of I/me/you/we/they/them/us images (referred to by Elias as I/We images) of females and femininity is connected to the unequal and fluctuating balance of gender-power in media sport networks. Such gender relations intersect with relations of nation, race/ethnicity, social class, disability and sexuality. Elias’s model of established-outsider relations provides a way of understanding the dynamics and multi-layered nature of media representations of I/We images through consideration of “the mutual conditioning of processes of meaning and power”.<sup>43</sup> Elias’s thinking about power and power chances is expressed in his theory of established-outsider relations.

The monopolization of key positions of power provide the foundation for the development and representation of an ideology of insider and outsider people<sup>44</sup>. Central in the maintenance of such positions of power are networks of gossip within communities that tend to be selective and distorting. Commentaries about the least flattering aspects of outsiders, applicable to only a minority of the outsider group (blame gossip) construct a narrow image of social life based on the ‘minority of the worst’<sup>45</sup>. Concomitantly, the flow of gossip by established people about themselves is characterised by talk about the most flattering aspects of their behaviours (praise gossip), which also produces and maintains a partial image of social reality but one based on the ‘minority of the best’.<sup>46</sup> The ideological construction of I/We or We/They or Us/Them images through established outsider relations serves to reinforce divisions between people on the basis of intersecting social relations including national identity, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, disability and sexuality. Moreover, there

is a psychological component to such ideology via the internalization of unfavourable, collective (we) images by outsiders (group disgrace) and a corresponding embodiment of favourable we-ideals by insiders (group charisma). This is not to say that power relations and identifications are fixed or unchallenged. Tension and conflict mark out the production and reproduction of status hierarchies<sup>47</sup>. The precise expression of such power struggles and the character of the “power-identity nexus” varies according to the character of the social conditions under examination.<sup>48</sup>

Using an intersectionality approach informed by Elias’s ideas about identification has helped to illuminate the way that gender, race/ethnicity, and national identification intersect in mutually constitutive ways in media representations of British female athletes at Olympic Games in Athens 2004. Before further comment is made about such media representations we outline the methods used in this study.

### **Media Sport, Women and Discourse Analysis**

Rather than relaying a simple reflection of the world, mediated sport constructs particular images and represents specific messages about the world in which we live. The mass media is significant in the formation of public opinion about women in sport. It is well documented that sports women receive less media coverage than sports men<sup>49 50 51</sup> and that the mediation of sportswomen reflects, reinforces and maintains narrow versions of femininity based on ideals of (western) beauty and heterosexuality as well as trivialising their performances as sub-(male)-standards<sup>52 53 54</sup>. A growing corpus of work identifies the overlapping character of gender, national identity and race/ethnicity and it is with this literature in mind that we have begun our research<sup>55 56 57</sup>.

In order to understand the complexities of gendered national identity in media representations of British women athletes at the Olympic Games in Athens 2004 television

coverage by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) has been collected for analysis. The aims of the broader project are twofold. *First* the research investigates the ways in which nation, femininity and race/ethnicity intersect in the mediation of female athletes. In doing so we draw on the principles of interpretive or ethnographic content analysis. *Second* the research seeks to examine how mediated representations of female athletes at the 2004 Games in Athens are received and perceived by audiences. Here the use of focus groups is the principle method of research. In this paper we consider the first aim using selected media material of one British Female Olympian; Dame Kelly Holmes.

The BBC coverage of the Olympic Games 2004 that is used in our broader project was broadcast on two terrestrial public service channels, BBC1 and BBC2, from 12<sup>th</sup> August (the Olympic Games officially opened on 13<sup>th</sup> August) to 29<sup>th</sup> August (closing ceremony). This included a daily morning programme titled 'Olympic Grandstand' that covered highlights of previous days events and live footage of the current days sport and a lunch time programme titled 'Olympic Report' which presented news shorts about results. Afternoon programming returned to the morning format of Olympic Grandstand and the evening coverage continued with reports of the day. There was a late evening summary in a programme titled 'Olympics Today' at approximately 10.35pm BST (British Summer Time). The BBC programming schedule represented approximately 222 hours of media coverage of the 2004 Olympic Games in total. For the purposes of this paper, the mediation of Kelly Holmes competing for Great Britain in the 800m and 1500m track events in which she won two gold medals was selected. Of the 222 hours of televised Olympic footage approximately 78 hours contained references to Kelly Holmes. The discourse analysis in this paper was based on further selection of media material amounting to 3 hours and 40minutes of footage which focused on the build up to the women's 800m and 1500m finals, the live broadcast of each event and

subsequent programming that presented material connected to Kelly Holmes winning both events.

Our discourse analysis reflects a qualitative content analysis approach enabling the researcher to examine artefacts of social communication such as the media<sup>58</sup>. This involves consideration of the words and meaning of a text and the manner in which they are offered. There are many types of content analysis and the method has its roots in quantitative techniques of metrically defining units and comparing them between documents. However, quantitative content analysis does not capture the context of an on-going narrative and such critiques have led to the emergence of qualitative content analysis; a method that includes the categorisation of themes but also the examination of those themes to explore the meaning of a given text<sup>59</sup>. The researcher can employ qualitative content analysis to examine the ideology, themes, topics and symbols of particular phenomena. In doing so, this method of analysis is not limited to *manifest content*; that which is physically present and countable, but also extends to *latent content*; an interpretive reading of symbolism that underlies the data<sup>60</sup>. A form of qualitative content analysis referred to as ethnographic content analysis is a method that “follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development and sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation<sup>61</sup>. The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, including an orientation to constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situation, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances”<sup>62</sup>. This research reflects the principles of ethnographic content analysis and uses a discourse analysis framework.

Drawing attention to the analysis of media content it has been suggested there is, “no strict distinction between content analysis on the one hand and explicit discourse analysis on the other hand”<sup>63</sup>. The aims of discourse analysis are concentrated on “revealing the ways in which communication legitimises or maintains ideology” which assumes “a sense of reality is

constructed through the use of language” and that power relations are embedded within a given text<sup>64</sup>. We also harness the principles of semiotic analysis which focus on the idea that symbolism within television production occurs in relation to five overlapping channels of communication; graphics, image, voice, sound effects, and music<sup>65</sup>. We are also mindful of the significance of intertextuality in understanding mediated sport. Intertextuality traces meaning to a network of relations as “meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers and relates”.<sup>66</sup> Intertextuality concerns interconnectedness and relationality in the sense that all texts have meaning in relation to other texts. This paper considers the ways that multiple channels of communication intersect in the construction of meaning about sports women, race/ethnicity and national identity in selected media representations of Dame Kelly Holmes.

The analysis in this paper is selective and partial. It identifies a *pattern* of representation in terms of the intersections of nation, femininity and race/ethnicity. Our aim is to make comments about how discursive media strategies may construct and reconstruct messages about gender, race/ethnicity and national identity and we wish to highlight the preliminary nature of the interpretation at this stage in the research. We also acknowledge that ours is not the only reading of the media material that we examine. The discussion is a precursor to the work that is part of the broader research project.

### **The Olympics, Women and Belonging to the Nation: Ambivalence, Hope and Pleasure**

The women’s 800m final at the 2004 Olympic Games was televised live on BBC 1 on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2004 at 7.00pm. Kelly Holmes was the British female athlete competing in the event. In terms of national sentiment, the visual images and narrative surrounding the event began in a somewhat ambivalent manner. There was little commentary about national identity or narrative about Holmes as a British athlete. Verbal references to Great Britain were

only made when the list of competitors were read out prior to the start of the race but this was the case with the national affiliations of other athletes and Holmes's Britishness was not marked out in any distinct verbal manner. Visual references to Great Britain were only seen in the uniform that Kelly Holmes wore. There was more direct reference to the significance of sports women in uniting a nation when the live broadcasting captured the final attempt of the female Greek triple jumper Hrysopiya Devetzi. Making reference to the possibility that Holmes and other female athletes represent the collective 'we' image of the nation Steve Cram comments "we are cheering for Kelly but this stadium is rising for the Greek athlete Dvetzi" and when Devetzi fails to win the gold he makes a vague implication that the hopes of the British nation are on Kelly Holmes by exclaiming "oh no, no, no it's not to be for Devetzi, Mbango is the Olympic Champion, let's hope Kelly Holmes can be too". Further research may reveal that the media forges relatively strong links between female athletes and national identity. Nevertheless, in the build up to the 800m final Kelly Holmes's performance is relatively separated from national belongingness, national identification and the expectations of a nation. At the same time, as will be discussed later, her gendered identity as a female athlete appears to be somewhat trivialised through the use of informal first name references constructing the woman athlete in an infantile, adolescent image.

In terms of nationhood, there is a direct contrast here to media treatment of male dominated British sports such as football (soccer), rugby and cricket where national performances are mediated in ways that promote and strengthen national belongingness and often do so by reinforcing national difference.<sup>67</sup> War and military metaphors are particularly potent ones in promoting national rivalry, as is the tendency to evoke national stereotypes and harness nostalgic images of nationhood.<sup>68</sup> Such imagery is predominantly founded upon traditional notions of sport as male, manly and masculine with references to strength, aggression and physical prowess dominant. While the final of the women's 800m at the 2004

Olympic Games provided a setting for the expression of national identity and the mobilisation of national belonging-ness around a female athlete and in connection with women's representation of the nation, the opportunity to do so was marginalized. There was a sense, then, that either female performances cannot carry the expectations of the nation or unite the nation in the same way that male performances can, and that there was no great hope for the British nation in the performance of Kelly Holmes in the 800m event. There was no sense of excitement or expectation in the commentary prior to the race. The commentator spoke with indifference about Holmes's preparation and previous performances stating that she had had an "untroubled season" and doubt was cast about her ability to deliver a winning performance in this event by adding "but can she win?" While it has been argued that sport engenders a sense of national identity because "we want to know who will win and 'we' hope it will be our 'own' competitor" we suggest that such comments may apply more to male competitors than to females<sup>69</sup>. In the BBC broadcast of the women's 800m final at the 2004 Olympics the hopes of the British nation did not seem to be captured or expressed. Rather, Kelly Holmes's potential tended to be individualised and disengaged from national pride. The individualised type of commentary focused on psychological and tactical performance criteria. For example, Cram's final commentary before the starter's orders served to symbolically advise Holmes to "put yourself in a good position, concentrate, react and hope it's your day". There were no final words of support or references that would suggest a connection between national pride and Holmes's performance.

As the race got under way, the mood and expression of the media commentary rapidly transformed. While Kelly Holmes ran the beginning of the race from the back of the field her supreme middle distance running tactics saw her gradually but convincingly move up to the front runners as the race progressed. The possibility of success provided a foundation for a rapid and intensifying presentation of national sentiment from the media presenters. As



Holmes came into the back straight and overtook the remaining athletes she drew level with her training partner Maria Matola and Steve Cram, almost bursting with excitement exclaimed “can she get there for Britain ....one more girl ....Kelly’s won for Great Britain”. During immediate replays of the event the focus of comments shifted from individual (I) references of Kelly ‘the athlete’ to collective (we) references of the British nation in statements such as “what a fantastic night for Great Britain” and “this is the Olympic Champion for Great Britain”. These first direct and emotionally charged references to national identification in the live broadcast emerge with the winning of a gold medal. It is clear that victory in international sport can be viewed as a marker of national unity and pride as well as being symbolic of a nation’s superiority<sup>70</sup>. Further media commentary immediately invoked nostalgic references to past performances as Foster cried “40years ago Ann Packer won the 800m in Tokyo, now Kelly Holmes”. Such a statement is significant in illustrating that women athletes are central to the emergence, development and feelings connected to the sporting nation. Indeed, Holmes’s potential success in the final of the Olympic 1500m final was surrounded by notions of history making with Sue Barker commenting “this is her chance to make history by winning the middle distance double” as well as nostalgic references to gold medal winning middle-distance athletes such as Albert Hill, Eric Liddell, Harold Abrahams and Sebastian Coe. Furthermore, media commentary presented ideals about English cultural nationalism through references to the bestowing of orders, medals and decorations of the United Kingdom (at Westminster). As Foster remarked before the race “Coe got a Lordship for his double. Would it be Dame [Kelly]” and later after Holmes’s success in the 1500m he cried out “Dame, Duchess, Queen ...whatever you like”. Such references are expressions of nationalistic reverie based on a history of rewarding subjects loyal to the nation. They represent a degree of acceptance of Kelly Holmes into the collective ‘we’ image of the British nation and the imagined community of Great Britain.

There is the possibility that women's sport and female sports stars may provide a setting for mobilisation and strengthening of national identity. However, we wish to emphasise that there are other gendered references to the nation in media commentary during the final of the women's 800m that undermine women's sporting performances and marginalize women's affiliation with the nation. While success has afforded Holmes the privilege of belonging to the nation and instilled a sense of her being one of 'us', her insider status is tempered by references to narrow and traditional notions of femininity. For example, the repeated use of the term 'girl' may be viewed as trivialising a sense of womanhood, and, as previously noted the informal use of the first name can be considered to reduce women to an adolescent or child status. While Holmes may well have instilled a sense of pride in the nation by her success in the 800m event as other women have done in the past, she is still perhaps a marginal member of the nation by virtue of being a woman. Male success at international competition is associated with feelings of national pride, yet the immediate emotions invoked in media commentary about Holmes's 800m Olympic Gold Medal were ones of relief and disbelief with Johnathon Edwards remarking that "I can't quite believe Kelly Holmes is Olympic Champion". Moreover, the type of national sentiment afforded to Holmes immediately after winning is a somewhat diluted version of national pride defined by Steve Cram in a sentimental manner as pleasing/pleasurable. In his words, Holmes's performance had made it a "pleasure to be in the stadium". Arguably the performances of sports women are not, as yet, mediated with the intensity and strength of national sentiment as their male counterparts because nations and national identities are characterised and dominated by male-dominated and masculine definitions and because there remains an "overwhelming masculine focus on media sport" in which females and the feminine tend to be eradicated, marginalized and symbolically annihilated.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Girl with the Golden Touch?: Nation, Ethnic Signifiers and Competing Femininities**

After her success in the 800m the recognition and status of Holmes as a British athlete was debated in commentary in the build up to the 1500m Olympic final. Strategies that constructed national images of Us/Them were evident. In a discussion about Holmes's potential for winning the 1500m Sue Barker commented to Michael Johnson, the (retired) American sprinter and world record holder in the 200m and 400m who commentates for the BBC "Michael you won't be able to be a part of my first question which is that if Kelly Holmes wins the 1500m will it be the greatest achievement of a British athlete?" The conclusions one might draw from these comments which have a bearing on national identification are that Sue Barker has assumed that Michael Johnson did not know his history of British athletics because he was American and/or that Michael Johnson is excluded from the discussion because he is American and, thus, has no right to comment. Barker exerts her dominance as the British presenter on a British television broadcast and literally puts Johnson's opinion to one side casting him in the role of outsider in discussions about British sporting history. The lines between being and belonging to the British nation and being American are drawn and Kelly Holmes is placed on British territory at least.

Holmes's affiliation to the nation appears to be more certain in media terms for the final of the 1500m and in contrast to the initial ambivalence of the media representations of the women's 800m final, the women's 1500m final involved national imagery including close up shots of British flags, emblems and face painting and Holmes wrapped in the Union flag in replays of Holmes's 800m success. The montage most often used in the lead up to the final of the 1500m was set to a song by a contemporary British band, Razorlight titled 'Golden Touch'<sup>72</sup>. The title of the song reinforces the imagery of success. The first line of the song 'I know a girl with the golden touch' harnesses the hopes of a nation that a female, Kelly Holmes, has a special quality that will help her win gold in the 1500m as she did in the 800m.

But Holmes's performance, her preparation, her tactical and athletic skill and prowess are subverted in favour of commentary that reinforces the traditional 'face' of femininity.<sup>73</sup>

Acceptance into the national psyche is, in part, contingent upon being seen to display traditional feminine aesthetics. In the preparation for the women's 1500m final at the 2004 Olympics the media commentary began with a dialogue between Colin Jackson the retired British 110m hurdler who is a Welsh athlete with Jamaican, Maroon and Scottish ancestry and Sue Barker the retired British tennis player. Barker comments that "Kelly has got a new hairstyle today... Colin". Jackson replies "Yes, she really did as you describe as girly things to relax yesterday". Barker's response is to giggle and agree while Jackson goes on to say "She had her nails done, she had her hair done and she's just tried to relax and, and really play down in her own mind the feat that she's actually up against today". Hairstyle and the way we do it reflects both "individual expressions of the self" and "society's norms, conventions and expectations"<sup>74</sup>. In her autobiography Holmes indicates that getting her hair done is a strategy for relaxation as Jackson's commentary indicates. But Holmes had chosen to have her hair styled using a contemporary braided or corn-row style associated with black hairstyling and, although no comment was made at the time, had used a similar style for the 800m final. Prior to the final of the 1500m the Jamaican athlete Aleen Bailey braided Holmes's hair.<sup>75</sup> The cornrow style used by Holmes is an expression of and identification with black culture, and another athlete identifying with corporeal aspects of black culture held the art of braiding in this context. The dialogue between Barker and Jackson reinforces a taken-for-granted universalistic conceptualisation of hairstyling that reduces hair to a narrow definition of femaleness and femininity and silences self-expression of race/ethnicity. The tone and expression of their comments is entirely 'gossipy' being both selecting and distorting as well as trivial. It is through gossip that people "compete in demonstrating their fervent adherence to their own group norms".<sup>76</sup> In identifying hair and nail practices as "girly" activities Jackson

and Barker's exchange is replete with the assumption that such beauty practices are appropriate ones for girls and women to engage in and, furthermore, they construct an image of Holmes in terms of acceptable femininity. The way in which Barker giggles at Jackson's suggestion that it is she who would label beauty practices as "girly" and the implication that he supports such an idea creates a kind of charisma reflecting the psychological internalization of favourable images of females and femininities. Selecting stereotypical aesthetics of the feminine, such gossip also distorts the image of femininity towards white beauty including connotations of upward social mobility in the conflation of hairdressing with manicuring. Implicit in Jackson's comment is the assumption that such female beauty practices are ones which women of higher rather than lower social orders engage in because they have the cultural capital and economic resources to do so. Arguably, the silence about black hairstyling symbolises the assumed lower social status of black women. It is argued that "all black hairstyles are political" and black hairstyling articulates "aesthetic solutions" to a range of "problems" created by the ideologies of race and racism.<sup>77</sup> The media may be instrumental in reconstructing contemporary racism and sexism through imagery and commentary about corporeal practices such as black hairstyling.<sup>78</sup> While we would not go as far as to say that the media commentary in this study is racist, there is some preliminary evidence that racial/ethnic ideologies suffuse media representations. Our media example about Kelly Holmes's hair illustrates that ethnicity is unspoken and the visible aesthetic of black hairstyling is devalued and depoliticized by the silence surrounding it<sup>79</sup>. Such silences are as important as the visible imagery and verbalised commentary in understanding the mediation of nation, gender and race/ethnicity.<sup>80</sup>

The emphasis on stereotypical imagery of femininity also takes precedence over expressions of nation and nationhood. The "feat" that Holmes was up against was a sporting performance of great significance to the nation and as already noted there was potential for

Kelly Holmes to make sporting history by winning the 800m and the 1500m. Yet, the commentary immediately prior to the race serves to marginalise, even devalue the relationship between Holmes and the nation by emphasising aspects of Holmes aesthetic appearance that are symbolically tied to (hetero) sexual and glamorised ideals of femininity. The intersection of nation and femininity is, thus, framed by stereotypical images of gender. The potential for Kelly Holmes to represent broadening definitions of femininity via her physical strength and muscularity is masked by references to narrow images of female physicality based on aesthetic appearance of her hair styling and manicuring that are irrelevant to her performance. While Kelly Holmes might be the girl with the golden touch as the song suggests “she’s got enough, she’s got too much”<sup>81</sup>. We argue that the extent to which she can represent the collective ‘we’ image of the British nation is conditional not only on her success but on representation of idealised, stylised and commodified versions of white femininity. As the final verse of the Razorlight lyrics warns “don’t ask for too much. You are gonna need your golden touch”.<sup>82</sup> The implication here is that not only will Kelly Holmes need every ounce of her athletic prowess to win the race and, thus, be worthy of symbolising the nation, but she will also need to manage and be managed in terms of representing an acceptable female/feminine face of the nation. As a nation’s heroine Kelly Holmes is presented as a universal symbol of grace under pressure. Any self-expression of difference in terms of femininity and race/ethnicity is silenced in favour of established ideals of feminine appearance and performance.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of the dynamics of national identification sport is the “supreme carrier of national values” but in “fronting global satellite television, sport will unquestionably change the values, the meaning, of ‘nation’”.<sup>83</sup> While media sport may provide a space for the re-

presentation of alternative imagery of national identity in terms of its intersection with femininity and race/ethnicity, the opportunity to do so is rarely taken. Rather, stereotypical versions of gender, race/ethnicity and national identity are preferred; ones which present the universal, glamorised, commodified 'face' of femininity, construct silence around ethnic signifiers and alternative/broadening definitions of femininity and marginalize the potential for female athletes to define the nation.

There is preliminary evidence in this paper that media discourse surrounding sport and national identity serves to obliterate difference, blur the intersectionality of national identification with femininity and race/ethnicity, exclude women's voices and construct a unified, bounded space defining the nation<sup>84</sup>. The price of belonging-ness, connectedness, and continuity in media representations of sport and national identity appears to construct a marginal position for women in the nation. Further research is needed to examine the precise nature of the national identity/femininity/race/ethnicity dynamic in media representations of female athletes at the Olympic Games in Athens 2004 and at other Olympic/Paralympic festivals.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge financial support for this research provided by Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. We wish to thank Bob Barney, Mike Weed and Dikaia Chatziefstathiou for their helpful comments.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (New York: SUNY, 2001), xi.

<sup>2</sup> John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Montserrat Guibernau. *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

- 
- <sup>6</sup> David Rowe, Jim McKay and Toby Miller, *Come Together: Sport, Nationalism, and the Media Image*, in *MediaSport*, eds., Lawrence A. Wenner (London: Routledge, 1998) 119-133.
- <sup>7</sup> John Hargreaves, *Spain Divided: The Barcelona Olympics and Catalan Nationalism in Sport in Divided Societies*, eds. John Sugden and Alan Bairner (Oxford: Meyer and Meyer, 2000), 13.
- <sup>8</sup> John Horne, Alan Tomlinson and Garry Whannel, *Understanding Sport: An Introduction to the Sociological and Cultural Analysis of Sport* (London: E & F N Spon, 1999).
- <sup>9</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston MA: South End Press, 1981).
- <sup>10</sup> Martin Polley, *Moving the Goalposts – A History of Sport and Society since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).
- <sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 24.
- <sup>14</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Polity: 1983), 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Lincoln Allison, *The Changing Politics of Sport* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 354.
- <sup>16</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> Laura Hills and Eileen Kennedy, *Space Invaders at Wimbledon: Televised Sport and Deterritorialization*, *Sociology of Sport Journal* 23, no. 4 (2006), 431.
- <sup>18</sup> Dikaia Chatziefstathiou, *The Changing Nature of the Ideology of Olympism in the Modern Olympic Era* (PhD diss., Loughborough University, 2005), 232.
- <sup>19</sup> Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- <sup>20</sup> Breda Gray, *The Home of Our Mothers and Our Birthright for Ages? Nation, Diaspora and Irish Women in New Frontiers in Women's Studies: Knowledge, Identity and Nationalism* eds. Mary Maynard and June Purvis (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), 164-187.
- <sup>21</sup> Susan Birrell, *Discourses on the Gender/Sport Relationship: From women in Sport to Gender Relations*, *Exercise and Sport Sciences Review*, 16 (1988), 359-503.
- <sup>22</sup> Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport*, 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sport*, (London: Routledge, 1994).
- <sup>24</sup> Garry Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Maculinties and Moralities* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>25</sup> Mary Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference' in Feminist Thought in *Gender and Sport a Reader*, eds. Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff (London: Routledge, 2002), 111.
- <sup>26</sup> Ann Hall, *Feminism and sporting bodies: Essays on theory and practice* (Leeds: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1996), 40.
- <sup>27</sup> Louise Mansfield, *Involved-detachment: A Balance of Passion and Reason in Feminisms and Gender Related Research in Sport, Tourism and Sports Tourism*, *Journal of Sport and Tourism* 12, no.2 (2007), 99-115.
- <sup>28</sup> Mary Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference' in Feminist Thought in *Gender and Sport a Reader*, eds. Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff (London: Routledge, 2002) 111-127.
- <sup>29</sup> Avtar Brah, *Questions of Difference and International Feminism in Out of the margins: Women's studies in the Nineties*, eds. Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby (London: Routledge, 1991), 168-176.
- <sup>30</sup> Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference'
- <sup>31</sup> Eilish Rooney, *Intersectionality in Transition: Lessons from Northern Ireland*, *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues* 5 (2007),3; <http://webjcli.ncl.ac.uk/2007/issue5/roney5.html>
- <sup>32</sup> Patricia Hills Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- <sup>33</sup> Leslie McCall, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005), 1771-1800.
- <sup>34</sup> McCall, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, 29.
- <sup>35</sup> Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference', 119.
- <sup>36</sup> Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference', 119.
- <sup>37</sup> Maynard, 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference', 112.
- <sup>38</sup> Collins, *Fighting Words*, 207.
- <sup>39</sup> Jessica Ringrose, *Troubling Agency and 'Choice': A Psychosocial Analysis of Students' Negotiations of Black Feminist 'Intersectionality' Discourse in Women's Studies*, *Women's Studies International Forum* 30, no. 3 (2008), 264-278.
- <sup>40</sup> Nibert Elias *What is Sociology?* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 118.
- <sup>41</sup> Stephen Mennell, *The Formation of We-images: A Process Theory in Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 175-197.



- 
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 177.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 177.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, 180
- <sup>44</sup> Norbert Elias and John Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*. (London: Sage, 1994).
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Elias, N. (1998). *On civilization, power and knowledge*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press:
- <sup>48</sup> Mennell, *The Formation of We-images*, 185.
- <sup>49</sup> Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (London: Longman, 2000).
- <sup>50</sup> Pamela J. Creedon, *Women, Media and Sport – Challenging Gender Values* (London: Sage, 1994).
- <sup>51</sup> Lawrence Wenner, ed., *Mediasport* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- <sup>52</sup> Gina Daddario, Chilly Scenes from the 1992 Winter Games: The Mass Media and the Marginalisation of Female Athletes, *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11 (1994), 275-288.
- <sup>53</sup> Gina Daddario, *Women's Sport and Spectacle: Gendered Television Coverage and the Olympic Games* (Westport USA: Praeger, 1998).
- <sup>54</sup> Delia Douglas, To be Young, Gifted, Black and Female: A Mediation on the Cultural Politics at Play in Representations of Venus and Serena Williams, *Sociology of Sport Online* 2, no. 5 (2002).  
[http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v5i2/v5i2\\_3.html](http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v5i2/v5i2_3.html)
- <sup>55</sup> Hills and Kennedy, *Space Invaders at Wimbledon*.
- <sup>56</sup> Nancy Spencer, Sister Act IV: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: "Sincere fictions" and white racism, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 28, no. 2 (2004), 115-135.
- <sup>57</sup> Emma Wensing and Toni Bruce, Bending the Rules: Media Representations of Gender During an International Sporting Event, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38, no. 4 (2003), 387-396.
- <sup>58</sup> Bruce Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston; London: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).
- <sup>59</sup> David Altheide, *Qualitative Media Analysis* (California, USA: Sage, 1996).
- <sup>60</sup> Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Science*.
- <sup>61</sup> Altheide, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 16.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>63</sup> Teun Adrianus van Dijk, *Discourse and Communication: New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1985), 4.
- <sup>64</sup> Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender, eds., *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- <sup>65</sup> Ellen Seiter, Semiotics, Structuralism and Television, in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, eds. Robert Allen (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 31-66.
- <sup>66</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.
- <sup>67</sup> Joseph Maguire and Emma Poulton, European Identity Politics in Euro '96: Invented Traditions and National Habitus Codes, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 1, 17-29.
- <sup>68</sup> Garry Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Maculinites and Moralities* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>69</sup> Garry Whannel, Individual Stars and Collective Identities in Media Sport, in, *Sport, Popular Culture and Identity*, ed. Maurice Roche (Aachen: Mayer and Mayer, 1998), 23.
- <sup>70</sup> D Stanley Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology* (California: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
- <sup>71</sup> Whannel, *Media Sport Star*, 45.
- <sup>72</sup> Razorlight, *Golden Touch*, <http://www.azlyrics.com>
- <sup>73</sup> "Beez" Lea Ann Schell and Stephanie Rodriguez, Subverting Bodies/Ambivalent Representations: Media Analysis of Paralympian, Hope Lewellen, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 18 no. 1, 127-135.
- <sup>74</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 100.
- <sup>75</sup> Kelly Holmes and Fanny Blake, *Black White and Gold* (London: Virgin, 2004).
- <sup>76</sup> Mennell, *The Formation of We-images*, 181.
- <sup>77</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 104.
- <sup>78</sup> Ben Carrington, 'Football's Coming Home?' But Whose Home? And Do We Want it Anyway? Nation, Football and the Politics of Exclusion in *Fanatics! Power, Identity and Fandom in Football* ed., Adam Brown (London: Routledge, 1998), 101-124.
- <sup>79</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 100.
- <sup>80</sup> Hills and Kennedy, *Space Invaders at Wimbledon*.
- <sup>81</sup> Razorlight, *The Girl with the Golden Touch*.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Blake, *The Body Language: The Meaning of Modern Sport* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Gray, *The Home of Our Mothers and Our Birthright for Ages?*, 173.

Department of Sport Science, Tourism and Leisure  
Canterbury Christ Church University  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury  
Kent CT1 1QU  
United Kingdom

Tel: 01227 782678 Fax 01227 863413  
Email [louise.mansfield@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:louise.mansfield@canterbury.ac.uk)