

Downplaying the public acknowledgement of the achievements of women in sport is rather like saying everyone should have a government but only men can vote for it.

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Released this week, the BBC Sports Personality of the Year shortlist is entirely male. [Mary Evans](#) argues that the list highlights the regressive elements of contemporary sport which detract from the achievements and aspirations of women, and in turn deny them the right to enjoy and participate in sports and to enjoy its rewards.



The present shortlist for the [BBC Sports Personality of the Year](#) has no women amongst the names: another of those apparently gender neutral lists that somehow turn out to be less than gender inclusive. In the light of this, the next step is to try and identify some explanations. There are the usual suspects in the money to be made in different sports and relationship those sports have to male/female participation and support. For example, a [recent report](#) found that sponsorship of women's elite sport in the UK amounted to just 0.5% of the total market between January 2010 and August 2011. Also culpable is the [different encouragement](#) given to girls and boys to take part in sport. For example, for many girls in the UK there is no obvious equivalent to football – the game that the great majority of boys know something about and will often play. Indeed, the relationship of women to football says much of the relationship of women to sport in general: the adoring Wag who is the reward for the prowess of the male sporting hero, cheer leaders of obvious dependence.

The many regressive elements in contemporary sport (think jousts and knightly favours as well as unequal financial gains) detract from the achievements and aspirations of women who 'do' sport and who deserve much more than complete symbolic absence for three reasons: first, because before all British women and men reach the physical size of a small sofa it would actually be a very good thing if more women were encouraged – and enabled – to give more time to 'real' exercise, rather than the exercise of working the proverbial double shift. Never mind saving the state money or living at least an extra decade: use it or lose it is a maxim that applies to the body as well as the mind. Crucial too is the value of a sense of ownership of the body – with the implication that its abilities belong to the individual person as much as to the wellbeing of others.

Second, being able to do sport, and enjoy its rewards, is a political right of both women and men, and downplaying or refusing the public acknowledgement of the achievements of women is rather like saying everyone should have a government but only men can vote for it. In some parts of the world, we might remember, women are not allowed to ride a bicycle or go swimming wearing anything less than a tent (quite how 7th century AD strictures on general modesty related to the gender of a bicycle rider is a mystery).

Third, not including women in the symbolic rewards of sport seems to suggest that just being outstanding (for example



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people such as [Chrissie Wellington](#), [Keri-Anne Payne](#), [Rebecca Adlington](#) and [Kath Grainger](#)) is not enough for women: they also have to be 'personalities', a point at which we might wonder, yet again, at the negative impact of the celebrity culture.

But it is also the point where we might connect the collective refusal of the journalists and editors who submitted suggestions to the shortlist to include women as viable sporting 'personalities' with more stringent regimes of the exclusion of women from sport. The UK allows women to 'do' sport, but perhaps at some level there is a subliminal sense that the desirable relationship of women to sport is that of supporting men, and doing so through our own, Western, parodic forms of femininity. It is thus that women are excluded from recognition, because we refuse to acknowledge those relational ways in which the body- in sport as elsewhere – is gendered.

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