

## Femininity, Childhood and the Non-Making of a Sporting Celebrity: The Beth Tweddle Case

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### Abstract

Gymnastics is regularly classified as a feminine-appropriate sport, embodying grace and elegance and is an Olympic sport which has regularly produced female sporting celebrities. Beth Tweddle is the most successful British gymnast of all time and the first to achieve international success, culminating in a medal at London 2012, yet she has received relatively little media coverage and few corporate endorsements. Employing a 'negative case' methodology, this athlete's relative lack of celebrity is investigated. The article suggests that it can be explained by (a) contradictions underpinning the gender-designation of gymnastics, and (b) the social invisibility of a core audience for the sport: young girls. An implication is that the achievement of celebrity within 'feminine' sport may be increasingly unattainable, especially for female athletes. The article uses mixed methods, including primary analysis of print and social media and secondary analysis of a national survey of young people in the UK.

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**Keywords:** *Sociology of Sport, Gender, Media, Gymnastics, Femininity, Girls*

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### Introduction

**1.1** On 6th August 2012 Beth Tweddle won an Olympic bronze medal in artistic gymnastics on the asymmetrical (or 'uneven') bars and became the first female British Olympic gymnastics medal winner.<sup>[1]</sup> Tweddle was already the first British woman to win a World Championship medal and the first Britain (of either sex) to win a World Championship gold medal (Armour 2012). Indeed, by 2012, after a decade of international gymnastics competition Tweddle had won three world championship titles (on bars in 2006 and 2010 and floor in 2009), half a dozen European Championship titles and had accumulated a host of other international victories (see Table 1, below). As she commented in the run up to, and aftermath of, the London games, by 2012 an Olympic medal was 'the one medal missing from my collection' (cf. Hattenstone 2012; Hilton 2012). Following the 2012 Olympics, collection complete, Beth Tweddle leaves the sport as the greatest British gymnast of the modern period, and yet she retires as a relative pygmy within the nation's sporting consciousness. This legacy is unpacked below.

**1.2** Previous studies have investigated the construction of celebrity (Andrews & Jackson 2001; Smart 2005) – this paper explores the relative absence of celebrity. It is thus an exploration of sporting misfit; of why some sportspeople fail to receive social recognition. The absence in this case is sociologically important because gymnastics has been conceptualised in the academic literature as the feminine sport *par excellence*; a sport that, due to its gender-fit, consistently garners media attention (Barker-Ruchti 2009; Billings 2007; 2008; Billings et al. 2010; Capranica & Aversa 2002; Jones et al. 1999; Koivula 1999; Sargent et al. 1998; Stokvis 2012). Gymnastics, therefore, suggests itself as the ideal site for the construction of female sporting celebrity and Beth Tweddle (as national standard-bearer) an ideal candidate for such celebrity. Therefore, this is a 'negative case'; a case 'in which an outcome which had been predicted by theory did not occur' (Emigh 1997: 649). As Emigh suggests, sociological exploration of negative cases can be especially fruitful in extending sociological theory and understanding, in this case understanding of the relationship between sport and femininity.

**1.3** The following sections provide an overview of sport, gender and the media; examine media coverage of Olympic gymnastics; and discuss the relationship between gymnastics and femininity. The paper then focuses on the case of Beth Tweddle. Quantitative analysis of print media is used to empirically document her relative non-celebrity. An explanation for this is then offered in the final sections, where two key issues are identified: (1) the contradictory impact of gymnastics' feminine-designation on the production of sporting celebrity; (2) the apparent demographic of the fan-base (young girls) and their lack of currency in mainstream sport. The conclusion discusses the implications of this analysis for female sporting celebrity within and beyond gymnastics.

### Sport, gender and the media

**2.1** Much sport was deemed unladylike, even dangerous, for women until well into the twentieth century (for example women were excluded from the Olympic marathon until 1984 and from Olympic Boxing until 2012). Scholars have argued that even as women entered the sporting arena, dominant discourses of the feminine body focused on sexuality rather than muscularity or power (Hargreaves 1994; Pfister 2010). Thus women's sport is rarely represented in the media and, where it is, is sexualised, and women's task-irrelevant personalities, beauty, grace or sex appeal highlighted (Billings et al. 2010; Jones et al. 1999; Kinnick 1998; Wanneberg 2011). In the UK men's professional football, cricket, golf, boxing, motor racing and rugby gain the lion's share of sport media. Other sports, which receive considerably less attention, are still generally covered only in their male variant (for example, cycling, basketball, ice hockey). Tennis is often noted as an exception, as top male and female tournaments run concurrently and tend to receive, if not completely, at least relatively equitable coverage (Crossman et al. 2007). The Olympics is another exception, a competition in which women and men compete in almost all of the same sports, often within the same arena at the same time, so that spectators of men's sport cannot but be spectators of women's (Capranica & Aversa 2002).<sup>[2]</sup>

**2.2** In the London 2012 aftermath commentators across the British media suggested the games had raised the profile of women in sports and that this might symbolise (or prompt) longer term transformation of women in sport and society (cf. Saner 2012). A *Telegraph* article claimed that 'it's Team GB's golden girls who have been grabbing the headlines at London 2012' (Philipson et al. 2012). Yet, British female athletes won just over a third (36 percent) of all GB medals. That women's sporting achievements were heralded, notwithstanding their relatively lower success than men, merely highlights the near invisibility of female athletes in non-Olympic sport and reminds us of the centrality of Olympic coverage for women in sport.

### **Olympic gymnastics and the media**

**3.1** Gymnastics is considered a 'big four' Olympic sport (with athletics, swimming and diving) (Billings 2007). In the mid-twentieth century as Olympic gymnastics became an arena for Cold War politics (Girginov 1998), media interest was at its height and Olympic icons created (Barker-Ruchti 2009; Chisholm 1999). Even today gymnastics is the Olympic event in which the world's dominant political and economic superpowers compete most directly (with China, the US, Russia and Japan topping the 2012 artistic gymnastics medal table<sup>[3]</sup>).

**3.2** Globally, gymnastics has received disproportionate media coverage irrespective of national success (a typical pre-requisite for such attention). In a series of US studies Billings (2007, 2008; Billings et al. 2010) shows that women's gymnastics accounted for over half of total coverage of women's Olympic sport in 1996 and around a third in 2000, 2004 and 2008. The US women's gymnastics team has been successful (albeit varyingly so) over this period. It has not, however, been more successful than US women in a range of Olympic sports, none of which have come close to this level of coverage.<sup>[4]</sup> Tellingly, a similar pattern is found in Italy, not a gymnastics powerhouse (Capranica & Aversa 2002). There is no equivalent study of British Olympic coverage, but there is evidence that gymnastics was prominent in British Olympic broadcasts in the late twentieth century, forming part of the country's social memory. This is evident in a series of four BBC-produced documentaries *Faster, Higher, Stronger: Stories of the Olympic Games*<sup>[5]</sup> that appeared in advance of London 2012 to explore the history of 'iconic Olympic events'. The 'iconic' events selected were: the 100m Sprint, Gymnastics, the 1500m ('Metric Mile'), and Swimming; only the gymnastics programme featured primarily female athletes.

### **Gymnastics and femininity**

**4.1** Gymnastics is commonly considered the archetypal feminine sport, by commentators (cf. Jones et al. 1999: 184; Kinnick 1998; Koivula 1999) and by experimental study participants (Matteo 1986). This is commonly attributed to gymnastics' properties as 'aesthetic sport' (Petca et al. 2013: 6), prioritizing aesthetics over athleticism/physicality. Hargreaves (1994: 159) elaborates:

'Those [sports] which emphasize balance, co-ordination, flexibility and grace (such as gymnastics, ice-skating and synchronized swimming) are characterized as 'feminine-appropriate' because they affirm a popular image of femininity and demonstrate their essential difference from popular images of sporting masculinity.'

**4.2** Concomitantly, social support for women's gymnastics has been conceptualised as perpetuating a conservative gender-regime. For example, Rowe notes that the state systematically discriminates against women's sport by underfunding it and 'diverting limited resources in the direction of so-called female appropriate, aesthetic sports (such as gymnastics and figure skating)' (Rowe 1998: 146).

**4.3** Barker-Ruchti (2009) shows that from the 1970s international gymnasts have not only been constructed as feminine but also childlike (see also Kinnick 1998).<sup>[6]</sup> The vulnerable/child designation is not simply a corollary of chronological age, but is reflective of the gymnastic body (short, without curves), itself produced through training and both reflects and reinforces femininized conceptions of the sport.

**4.4** The gender-appropriateness of gymnastics has been used to explain its high media exposure and that women's Olympic gymnastics garners more media attention than men's (Billings 2007; Higgs et al. 2003). Kinnick suggests that, 'women's sports which do receive coverage are likely to be sports which emphasize feminine ideals of elegance, glamour and beauty, such as figure skating and women's gymnastics' (1998: 215). Media coverage of gymnastics is typically imbued with stereotypical femininity: 'Thus [during the 1996 Olympics] the beauty and grace of the gymnasts was the main point of emphasis' in US print media (Jones et al. 1999: 190). Televised gymnastics broadcasts are also produced for, and appeal to, a largely female audience (Billings 2007; Koivula 1999; Pfister 2010; Sargent et al. 1998).

### **The non-making of a celebrity**

**5.1** Before Beth Tweddle, no female British athlete had won a gymnastics medal at World or Olympic Championships. Indeed, British teams rarely qualified for international competition. Tweddle's novel and

consistent success demonstrated that British gymnasts could succeed internationally. Her example, combined with increased elite-sport funding pre-2012, transformed British gymnastics training. Consequently by 2012 British male and female teams qualified for the gymnastics finals for the first time since the 1984 boycotted games (Armour 2012).

**5.2** In 2009, indicating her sporting achievement, Tweddle was nominated by Olympics organiser Sebastian Coe as his 'everyday hero'. Coe stated:

Beth is the most successful British gymnast of our generation. Her performance at the World Gymnastics Championships in London last month was extraordinary – and her grace, courage and determination will inspire thousands of kids on the road to 2012. ...we have a national treasure in Beth Tweddle, a home grown heroine who champions her sport and, in the power and passion of her performance, will inspire young people all round the country on the road to 2012 (Mirror 2009).

Three years later, after the 2012 games, Coe commended Tweddle again:

Beth Tweddle's bronze medal was a fitting reward for such a great servant to British sport. I think she's been slightly undervalued in terms of how good and how consistent she has been over the years. She has also probably given as much time to the London 2012 project, quietly and in unsung ways, as almost anybody. She was absolutely key in carrying the Olympic message to the North West (Coe 2012).

**5.3** Both statements reveal Coe's admiration, but there is an interesting evolution. The first, in the aftermath of her second World Championship title, recognises Tweddle as 'national treasure', 'heroine' and someone who 'will inspire young people all around the country'. It also employs the language of 'gracefulness' emblematic of femininity. The second, at what is probably the end of her career, is gender neutral, emphasises Tweddle's consistency, how good an athlete she is, yet notes that she has been 'undervalued', contributed in 'unsung' ways and geographically limits her influence to the North West (the location of her Chester home and Liverpool training base). Coe's two statements thus indicate evolution in his perception of her celebrity impact.

**5.4** Tweddle's relative lack of celebrity is revealed empirically by comparing her achievements and the media coverage accorded her with coverage accorded two other British 2012 Olympians: Tom Daley (diving) and Heather Watson (tennis).<sup>[7]</sup> All three (gymnastics, diving and tennis) are individual sports. All have been identified as 'stylistic' 'characterised by a striving for "perfection of form". They emphasise beauty and of body position and movement' (Sargent et al. 1998:52). Yet despite their emphasis on aesthetics tennis and diving are conceptualised as more 'gender-neutral' (Matteo 1986).

**5.5** As Table 1 illustrates, Tweddle received considerably less media attention than Daley or Watson. For example, Tom Daley features in three to six times more articles (depending on the search criteria used) and Heather Watson 16 to 29 percent more than Tweddle. Both have, however, enjoyed only a fraction of Tweddle's international success and career longevity.

**Table 1:** A comparison of media coverage and the competitive careers of Beth Tweddle with Tom Daley and Heather Watson

	<b>Beth Tweddle</b>	<b>Tom Daley</b>	<b>Heather Watson</b>
<b>Newspaper coverage (to end 2012)</b>			
Full name in headline <sup>a</sup>	147	880	178
Ratio (with Beth Tweddle)	1:1	5.99:1	1.21:1
Surname in headline (sport and first name in article) <sup>a</sup>	642	2214	827
Ratio (with Beth Tweddle)	1:1	3.45:1	1.29:1
Full name in headline or leading paragraph <sup>a</sup>	1952	6146	2263
Ratio (with Beth Tweddle)	1:1	3.15:1	1.16:1
<b>Twitter followers (25<sup>th</sup> November 2012<sup>b</sup>)</b>	48,357	2,070,174	36,869
Ratio (with Beth Tweddle)	1:1	42.8:1	0.76:1

## Sporting history (to end 2012)

Sport	Gymnastics	Diving	Tennis
Olympic medals	1 Bronze	1 Bronze	0
Olympic appearances	3 (2004–12)	2 (2008–12)	1 (2012)
Senior World Championships (Opens in Tennis)	3 Gold, 2 Bronze	1 Gold	0 (best: 3 <sup>rd</sup> round of Wimbledon)
Other International Championships	<b>European Championships:</b> 6G, 4S, 1B <b>World Cup Finals:</b> 1G 1S <b>World Cups:</b> 11G, 3S, 2B <b>Commonwealth Games:</b> 1G 2S	<b>European Championships:</b> 2G <b>Commonwealth Games:</b> 2G <b>Other:</b> Multiple international age group medals	<b>Women's Tennis Association Title:</b> 1 singles; 2 doubles (there are 31 WTA singles tournaments per year) <b>Other:</b> 2 ITF titles (there are several hundred ITF tournaments per year)
Highest National (British) Ranking (years at highest ranking)	<b>1</b> (7 years in a row national all-around champion. Individual apparatus champion other years)	<b>1</b> (Three times senior British 10m Champion)	<b>1</b> (July 2012 – April 2013)
BBC Sports Personality of the Year	2006: 3 <sup>rd</sup> place 2009: nominated		
Year of first senior international championship win (and age then)	2003 (age 18)	2008 (age 13)	2012 (age 20)

### Notes:

<sup>a</sup> All searches were conducted using Lexis-Nexis. Alternative versions of names (e.g. both 'Beth' and 'Elizabeth') were included in each search. The different counts are because different search criteria miss and capture different things, for instance articles within which these athletes feature less centrally.

<sup>b</sup> All have increased their followings since this date. Tweddle's following increased in the aftermath of her appearance in the reality television show, *Dancing on Ice* (discussed briefly below). Beth Tweddle's twitter page: <https://twitter.com/bethtweddlenews>; Tom Daley's: <https://twitter.com/TomDaley1994>; Heather Watson's: <https://twitter.com/HeatherWatson92>

**5.6** Changes over time in media coverage of these three athletes are explored in Figure 1. The data were constructed by searching the news database *Lexis-Nexis*. The criteria employed – that the athlete's full name (first and surname) was mentioned in either the headline or the first paragraph – was chosen as this had produced the highest counts and lowest differentials in the coverage of Tweddle versus Watson and Daley (see Table 1, rows 1–6). As such this comprises the most conservative estimate of differences in media coverage. To test for reliability alternative search criteria were used (e.g. that the athlete's surname appeared in the headline and their sport and first name appeared anywhere in the article). This resulted in lower counts, but when these data were mapped by year they produced comparably shaped charts, thus increasing confidence in the pattern described by Figure 1.



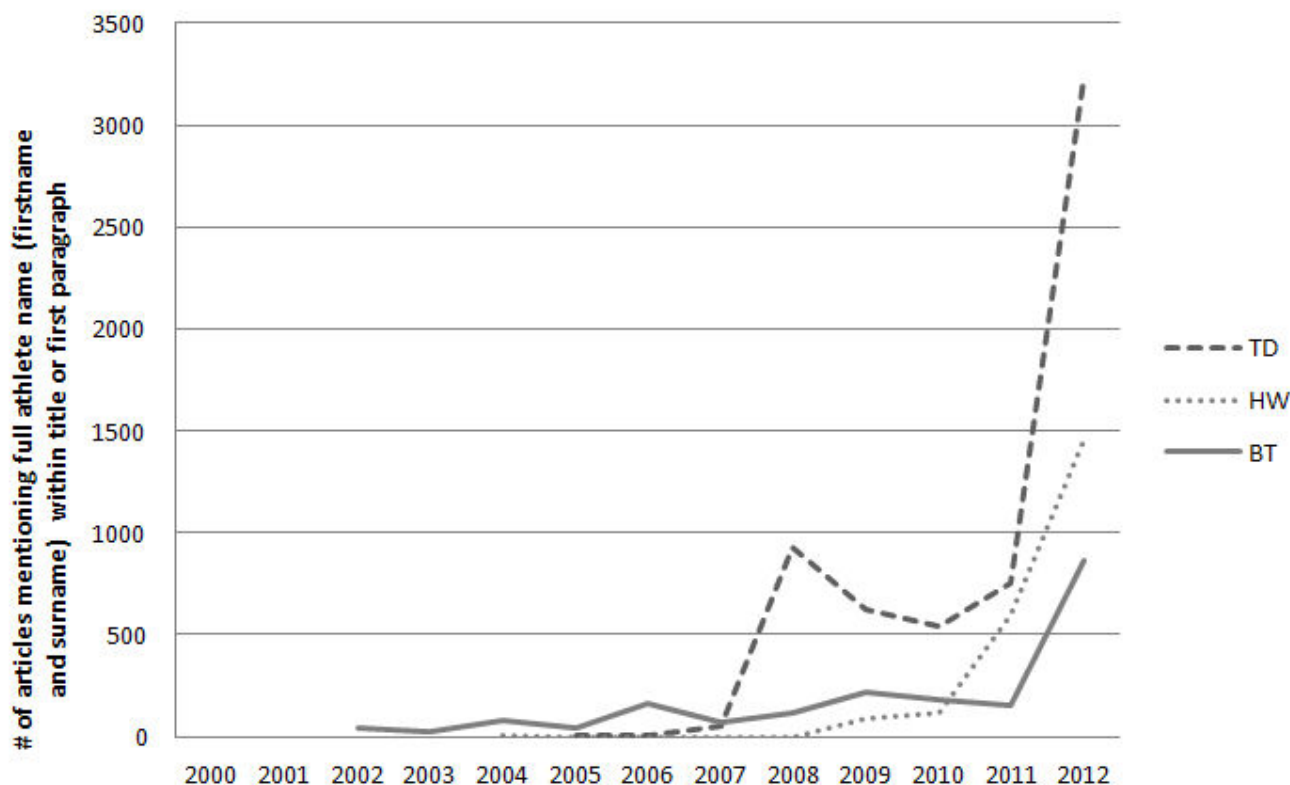


Figure 1. Newspaper coverage of Tweddle, Daley and Watson, by year

5.7 Unsurprisingly, 2012 marked a high-point of press interest in all three. Notably, however, as soon as Daley (2008) and before Watson (2012) achieved their first international successes news coverage of these athletes dramatically eclipsed coverage of Tweddle and continued to do so thereafter. Even in years when Tweddle won World Championship titles (2006; 2009; 2010) or nominations as BBC 'Sports Personality of the Year' (2006; 2009), media coverage was limited (moreover, about a third of total coverage appeared in regional publications<sup>[8]</sup>). We can conclude, therefore, that Beth Tweddle's sporting successes were reported by the press, but infrequently and with little fanfare, especially when compared to the attention accorded other, less ground-breaking<sup>[9]</sup>, athletes.

5.8 Smart (2005) suggests that sporting celebrity is increasingly intertwined with and interdependent on commercial endorsements. In Tweddle's case, notwithstanding the inclusion of various sponsors on her personal website<sup>[10]</sup>, including fashion retailer FCUK, her image was almost entirely absent from national commercial or event marketing in the run-up to 2012.

5.9 This section has outlined Tweddle's sporting achievements and her *relative* non-celebrity. Her non-celebrity is relative both in respect to her sporting achievements and in respect to the celebrity accorded other individual athletes. Her relative non-celebrity can also be understood as a negative-case, in light of previous academic analyses, which have suggested that female gymnasts are *more* likely than other female athletes to gain press attention (Barker-Ruchti 2009; Billings 2007, 2008; Billings et al. 2010; Capranica & Aversa 2002; Jones et al. 1999; Koivula 1999; Sargent et al. 1998; Stokvis 2012). To explain this relative non-celebrity the following two sections draw on previous research and develop analysis of social media and survey data.

### A case of misfit

6.1 By 2012, aged 27, Tweddle was a decade older than some of her competitors. Moreover in 2012, as in 2008, her uneven bars routines received exceptionally high difficulty scores, cementing her reputation as an innovator, specialising in novel combinations of tricky release-moves. Her age and powerful gymnastics style mean that Tweddle ill fits the child-pixie conceptualisation of female gymnasts. She is not young; not a vulnerable; her routines are not 'cute'. Indeed her body is shaped by injuries which limit the apparatuses on which she competes. Tweddle is also an aesthetic mismatch for the feminine/graceful gymnast. For much of her career, well into her twenties, Tweddle wore dental-braces and even a cursory internet search reveals derisory online-forum comments about her appearance. In a context in which female athletes' 'attractiveness' sells (Fink et al. 2004) Tweddle's lack of endorsements during London 2012 serves to highlight the superfluous aesthetic standards to which female athletes are held. The biggest misfit in this case may, however, be between the perceived femininity (and grace) of gymnastics and the reality of the sport as it has developed, rather than with Tweddle specifically.

6.2 Sargent et al.'s (1998) evaluation of how viewers assess different sports found that one of the primary classificatory dimensions for gymnastics was 'riskiness'. They therefore designate gymnastics, with skiing, as a 'risky stylistic' sport. The juxtaposition of these designations (risk and style), highlights an issue rarely dealt with by simplistic categorisations of gymnastics as 'elegant' or 'graceful' and thereby feminine. Over the last four decades gymnastics has increasingly moved away from its balletic roots with important changes to *The Code of Points* in 1975 and 2006 (Barker-Ruchti 2009). Each of these increased the points-value of, and therefore emphasis on, high-difficulty moves with novelty prized. As a consequence, bemoaned by some (as the following quote demonstrates)<sup>[11]</sup> has been that 'women's gymnastics have become so technically rigorous and physically demanding that the battle for Olympic gold leaves little

room for the artistry and joy that have made the sport one of the Games' most popular' (Clarke 2012). This evolution is not recent; rather, women's gymnastics has long been technically and physically demanding, yet:

The media's sensationalizing and sexualizing of women's gymnastics [from the 1970s] diverted the attention away from the immediate strength, power and courage gymnasts employed to execute the newly developed gymnastics elements." (Barker-Ruchti 2009: 56)

Thus the masculine elements of gymnastics were obscured and it retained its feminine designation. Today, with routines packed with high-risk elements space for 'artistry' grows ever smaller. Thus gymnastics as performed by Olympic athletes is increasingly removed from gymnastics as (imagined) feminine aesthetic practice.

**6.3** This highlights the difficulties faced by athletes in gender-feminine sports, despite the space for women they seemingly provide. As so-called 'aesthetic' sports, like gymnastics, become increasingly athletic competitors face a double-bind. They are condemned by commentators seeking elegance for forsaking the feminine ideal. Meanwhile, critics of the historic ghettoisation of women's sport seem oblivious to the extent to which these ghettos have evolved. Hence female athletes' hard-fought athletic success in gender-feminine sports goes relatively unheralded. Ironically, this may mean that male athletes, like British gymnast Louis Smith, find feminine-typed sport an increasingly amenable arena for the development of sporting celebrity.

### An invisible audience

**7.1** Despite little national media coverage, by the end of 2012 Beth Tweddle had over 48 thousand Twitter followers and six years earlier, in 2006, she received sufficient public votes to win third place in the BBC's *Sports Personality of the Year*.<sup>[12]</sup> This dichotomy – little media coverage and yet evidence of popular support – may be rooted in her core fans being a socially marginalised group (insofar as the sport media is concerned): young girls.

**7.2** Gymnastics has been part of the 'core' physical education programme for both girls and boys in the first three years of secondary education (Hargreaves 1994: 153). As Table 2 shows gymnastics ranked fourth in terms of participation for 11–15 year olds, with a quarter of children in this age group having participated in gymnastics within the four weeks prior to the survey.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Table 2:** Sport participation in the last four weeks (age 11–15 years) 2010–11, England, N=1,116

Sport	%	Range (+/-)
Football (include five-a-side)	50.0	3.1
Basketball	27.3	2.8
Swimming, diving or lifesaving	26.6	2.8
<b>Gym, gymnastics, trampolining or climbing frame</b>	<b>24.8</b>	<b>2.7</b>
Walking or hiking	22.5	2.6
Rounders	20.9	2.6
Cycling or riding a bike	20.4	2.5
Netball	19.3	2.5
Badminton	18.9	2.5
Rugby	17.9	2.4
Cross country, jogging or road running	17.9	2.4
Dodgeball	17.4	2.4
Cricket	17.3	2.4
Tennis	17.0	2.4
Table tennis	16.6	2.3
Hockey	14.5	2.2
Athletics, track and field events, running races or jumping	14.3	2.2
Aerobics, keep fit	12.3	2.1
Tenpin bowling	7.1	1.6

(Department for Culture 2011)

**7.3** Gymnastics is one of only a few sports in which juniors (under the age of 18) participate at much higher rates than adults (Department for Culture 2011; Stokvis 2012: 521). Gymnastics participants of all ages are, however, largely female (Pfister 2010). Further analysis of the 2010/11 *Taking Part* survey (see Table 3) highlights this, showing statistically significant gender differences in gymnastics participation amongst primary and secondary school age children. Thus, among children under 11, girls were over twice as likely as boys to have done gymnastics in the last four weeks ( $p < 0.001$ ). Of older children (aged 11–15), 31 percent of girls and 19 percent of boys had participated in gymnastics in the same period ( $p < 0.001$ ). If we focus on those who participate in sport in their spare time (who might be expected to be exercising choice), a similar gender split is evident ( $p < 0.01$ ). Importantly this final analysis indicates that 17 percent of young teenage girls, who do any sport in their spare time, are doing gymnastics. Gymnastics is thus a very important sport for a specific demographic (pre-teen and teenage girls).

Critically, it is one of only a few sports that both girls and boys participate in, but that girls participate in at much higher rates than do boys.

**Table 3:** Gender differences in participation in gym, gymnastics, trampolining or climbing frame<sup>a</sup>

	Girls		Boys		Chi-square (df =1)
	%	Total (N)	%	Total (N)	
Participation in past 4 weeks (age 5–10)	20.8	100% (784)	9.7	100% (806)	38.169***
Participation in past 4 weeks (age 11–15)	31.2	100% (542)	19.3	100% (574)	20.803***
Participation in SPARE TIME in past 4 weeks (age 11–15)	17.3	100% (336)	9.2	100% (390)	10.329**

<sup>a</sup> These categories are not differentiated in the survey questions.

Data from *Taking Part* survey 2010/11.<sup>[14]</sup> Analysis by the author. Sample taken from private households in England. Proxy surveys with guardians were conducted for children aged 5–10 and children aged 11–15 were interviewed themselves. Chi-square test for association: \*\*= $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < 0.001$ .

**7.4** The relationship between the demographic of gymnastics participation and the sport's fan-base is apparent from a brief examination of Beth Tweddle's twitter stream (@bethtweddlenews). For example, in the period 10 to 14 November<sup>[15]</sup> Tweddle tweeted 40 times. Of these almost half (19) are re-tweets of tweets sent to her from young gymnasts (as well as their parents, friends and relatives). The following are typical:

My 6 & 7 year olds have a gym comp this weekend – my littlest 1st comp – please wish them luck & all the Diamonds gymnasts!

my niece had her 1st 4piece comp yesterday, she won all 4 & her sister also medalled on floor, so proud, you inspired them!

Won my modified FIG gymnastics competition x yay !! Please rt

**7.5** Tweddle's personalised interaction with young (largely female) gymnasts reflects and (re)produces a specific fan-base, centred on those involved in her sport. Her degree of mundane engagement with, and 'recognition' (Muntean & Petersen 2009) of, followers' sporting progress is entirely absent from Daley and Watson's twitter streams and is rare in celebrity tweeting. For instance, Marwick and boyd (2011: 143) found that just five percent of celebrity tweets were retweets. In contrast, Daley and Watson tweet about their own activities and opinions; their re-tweets largely comprise dissemination of other celebrities' opinions or 'ego retweets' (boyd et al. 2010) in which they reproduce coverage of themselves.

**7.6** Further indication of the centrality of young girls to Tweddle's fan-base is indicated by the commercial products she has endorsed. Unlike many athletes whose life stories crowd the high street,<sup>[16]</sup> Tweddle's autobiography, *Becoming an Olympic Gymnast* (2012) was published within Collins Big Cat Reading Scheme. Just 80 pages long it is sold direct to schools (and via online booksellers), targeted at learner-readers it has full-colour annotated photographs and drawings on every page. The target market is therefore extremely limited, but the book has become a 'bestseller'<sup>[17]</sup> within the series (again indicating the resonance of Tweddle for this demographic). Beth Tweddle is also associated with *Gym Stars*, another product aimed at pre-teen girls, especially participating gymnasts. *Gym Stars* is a series of short novels about girls in a gymnastics club. Front-covers feature a star bearing the words: 'Forward by BETH TWEDDLE World & European CHAMPION GYMNAST' and each book includes practical gymnastic suggestions.

## Conclusions

**8.1** Perhaps we can best understand the relative absence of Beth Tweddle from the UK public and media consciousness as the product of a series of inter-related gendered frames. In the latter decades of the twentieth century gymnastics was remade into a sport about and for children, or to be more precise, about and for girls. Thus when adult female athletes appear who do not fit the dominant discourse of femininity or vulnerable child-like cuteness their athletic prowess and success receives little attention. Young girls are also central to gymnastics fandom. This non-traditional sporting fan-base has little economic or sporting capital and sporting broadcasts, publications or product endorsements targeting this demographic remain notable by their absence (Hargreaves 1994). Girls' sporting preferences are therefore rendered invisible within mainstream media.

**8.2** This article has also suggested that gymnastics, a 'feminine-appropriate' sport, is straining within its gender-designation and that this has produced contradictory outcomes: athletes perform difficult, physically demanding, risky routines, yet their athleticism is often unrecognised. Criticism (academic and political) of female athletes' ghettoisation into 'feminine' sport relies on reproducing and reifying a historic (and decreasingly appropriate) categorisation of the sport as elegant. Meanwhile, those who previously celebrated the 'elegance' of women's gymnastics now mourn its transformation. Accordingly, the small media space available to female athletes may be shrinking further. While this argument is specific to

female gymnastics, the contradiction identified – between increasing athleticism and the feminine designation – is posited as one faced by 'feminine' sport more widely. The most likely consequence is further reduction in the spaces within which female athletes can achieve popular renown.

**8.3** More specifically, with Beth Tweddle's retirement following London 2012,<sup>[18]</sup> whether she remains unheralded now depends on her ability to translate her sporting success into other realms. Her first attempt at this was an appearance on reality television competition, *Dancing on Ice* (January–March 2013). Tweddle won this competition, consistently topping the public vote, often despite criticism from the on-screen judges.<sup>[19]</sup> It may be that this was partly due to the invisible fan-base described here. There is, however, little indication that her popular support will necessarily transform Tweddle into a media celebrity. Indeed media coverage of her ice-dancing success was as muted as its coverage of her prior gymnastic success. She has, nonetheless, gained a new corporate sponsor: *Lil-Lets Teen*, for whom Tweddle 'talks body changes' and 'talks relationships' in online videos<sup>[20]</sup> aimed at girls beginning to menstruate. Her association with a product line that is feminine, socially invisible and aimed at young girls is perhaps coincidental, but provides an apt metaphor.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The first British Olympic medal dated back to 1908 and a completely different era of gymnastics. More recently, male gymnast Louis Smith won a bronze medal in 2008 and silver in 2012 on the Pommel Horse and Max Whitlock won a bronze on the same apparatus in 2012. The men also won a team bronze in 2012. Notably, although Smith achieved Olympic success before Tweddle, her international success preceded his and had precipitated the investment in British gymnastics that helped to produce these wins (Armour 2012).

<sup>2</sup>Even away from the Olympics, the most iconic of Olympic sports – track and field, swimming, diving and gymnastics – are more likely than are other sports, to be covered in both male and female variants.

<sup>3</sup>Compare this to national GDP, a list topped by (in order) the US, China and Japan in 2011. Russia was sixth on this list, but its geo-political influence (in the aftermath of the Cold War) arguably remains greater than this ranking.

<sup>4</sup>Including its male and female strains, in 2008 NBC broadcast more minutes of gymnastics than of any other Olympic event: 14 hours, 14 minutes. This was nearly two and a half hours more than Track and Field, the second most televised event (Billings et al. 2010: 16).

<sup>5</sup>See: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00v9bs4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00v9bs4) [accessed 20 November 2013].

<sup>6</sup>This was exemplified in 2008 with media outcries over two Chinese gymnasts' age (cf. Longman & Macur 2008), which regularly associated the competitors' youthfulness with exploitation. Whereas, however, other young athletes are applauded for their dedication (Lawton 2012) young female gymnasts are positioned as vulnerable.

<sup>7</sup>These sportspeople were selected to produce as valid comparisons as possible: both compete in individual sports that are regularly compared to gymnastics (diving is also a 'big four' Olympic sport (Billings 2007); tennis is regularly seen as a relatively level playing field for women); both athletes were (at the end of 2012) the top British athlete in their sport; both have had international success, but less than Tweddle, and neither has an Olympic title.

<sup>8</sup>The two daily Liverpool newspapers (Post and Echo), but also other local regional papers, e.g. the Stoke Sentinel and Chester Chronicle, regularly featured Tweddle.

<sup>9</sup>Neither Watson nor Daley were as pioneering in their sports as was Tweddle in gymnastics, since there have been (limited) British successes in diving and tennis previously.

<sup>10</sup>[www.bethtweddle.com](http://www.bethtweddle.com) [accessed 20 November 2012]

<sup>11</sup>See also the blog *Rewriting Russian Gymnastics*: <http://rewritingrussiangumnastics.blogspot.co.uk> [accessed 20 November 2012] in which this is a regular refrain/complaint.

<sup>12</sup>See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/sports-personality>

<sup>13</sup>For children aged 5–10 gymnastics was the fifth most popular sport, with 15% having participated in the four weeks prior to the *Taking Part* survey.

<sup>14</sup>Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Taking Part: the National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport, 2010–2011; Adult and Child Data* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2011. SN: 6855, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6855-1>. Further information at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-culture-media-sport/series/taking-part>

<sup>15</sup>This period was chosen as the five days previous to when this part of the research was conducted and as such is a convenience sample. Examination of Tweddle's twitter feed over several months in 2012 showed, however, that this pattern was typical.

<sup>16</sup>For instance Tom Daley's autobiography, *My Story* (2012) came out as a full length hardback and was given a featured position at WH Smiths and other large retailers.

<sup>17</sup>*Becoming an Olympic Gymnast* sold just under 10,000 copies within the first year of publication

(information in personal correspondence from Louisa Combs, Primary Campaign Manager, Collins Education)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/gymnastics/23585987> [accessed 11 August 2013]

<sup>19</sup> Tweddle topped the public vote consistently for the final six weeks of the show. Across the entire series her vote always ranked within the top three. See: <http://www.itv.com/dancingonice/news-and-gossip/voting-results> [accessed 4th April 2013].

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.lil-lets.co.uk/en-GB/becomingateen/Video> [accessed 9 August 2013]

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