Body Image in Long Distance Runners

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Body Image in Long Distance Runners

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

How would you describe the ideal runner’s body? Would you say it is tall or short? Skinny or fat? Muscular or lean? Is it the same as society’s ideal female’s body? A Division 2 collegiate female distance runner recently stated, “The ideal runner’s body is having a six pack and muscular quads and an overall skinny physique. The ideal female body, from what I gather from society, is having larger breasts and a butt, nice hair and a nice face. Runners do not always have the biggest extremities, so that makes me feel more self-conscious about my body because I definitely look and feel like a distance runner.” This runner’s response is just one of the many examples of how there is a conflict between what it means to want an ideal runner’s body, and the value of it for competing in the sport verses the reality of the American societal ideal.

Keywords

Body Image, Runner, Track and Field, Cross Country, Hegemonic Femininity
How would you describe the ideal runner’s body? Would you say it is tall or short? Skinny or fat? Muscular or lean? Is it the same as society’s ideal female’s body? A Division 2 collegiate female distance runner recently stated, “The ideal runner’s body is having a six pack and muscular quads and an overall skinny physique. The ideal female body, from what I gather from society, is having larger breasts and a butt, nice hair and a nice face. Runners do not always have the biggest extremities, so that makes me feel more self-conscious about my body because I definitely look and feel like a distance runner.” This runner’s response is just one of the many examples of how there is a conflict between what it means to want an ideal runner’s body and the value of it for competing in the sport verses the reality of the American societal ideal.

When I was a runner, I would always think about those questions. I would think about how I wanted to look like the ideal runner with defined muscles and no body fat, but at the same time, I wanted to be pleasing to society’s eye and have that hourglass figure with yes, big breasts and a big butt. It was something that was constantly on my mind. I wanted to be both a fit runner and a pretty woman. Many distance female runners feel the same way. After conducting fifteen interviews, I saw the pattern arise. All of the women that I interviewed loved running for many reasons (to relieve stress, to stay fit, to see places you cannot see by car), but they also stated that they felt like they had to look quite thin with large breasts, a large butt, and have that ‘sex appeal’ to them. This addresses the idea of hegemonic femininity, which speaks to the idea that a woman must conform to a certain role (which includes being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle) in order to be perceived as a traditional woman by society.

In order to see this double-edged sword with long distance runners and body image, I interviewed fifteen people. Every one of these people interviewed was a woman who participated in some sort of competitive long-distance running. Three of these women run on the varsity cross country team in high school, six of them run for a Division 3 college team, three run for a Division 2 college team, one runs for a Division 1 college team, and two are adult women who participate in half marathons and marathons in their free time. I also read a number of articles by a few scholars who specialize in this area, including pieces by Vikki Krane, Judith Butler, Susan Byrne, Neil McLean, and Maria-Christina Kosteli. These authors have different opinions on the topic, but they all write about female athletes, hegemonic femininity, and body image.

In this essay, I will discuss how body image affects female long-distance runners. More specifically, I will address how long-distance runners like running but there is a social issue where they feel like they need to fit in and be feminine for society. First, I will start by talking about the idea of hegemonic femininity. After I take you through that context, I will address the interviews and how the scholars’ ideas help inform an analysis of those interviews. Finally, I will discuss why this double-edged sword is important.
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when talking about gender, sport, and issues of body image.

**Hegemonic Femininity**

Hegemonic femininity is a term that is used to describe the expected qualities a woman is believed to have in society, or, in other words, the role that a woman must conform to in order to be perceived as a traditional woman by society. Vikki Krane states that “characteristics of hegemonic femininity include being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle” (117). These ideas are brought into the world of sports because sports are seen as masculine, not feminine. People in sports usually need to be competitive and assertive, which is not part of hegemonic femininity. “Strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity” (Krane 117). When women participate in sports, they are noncompliant with the role they are supposed to follow in order to be seen as a woman in society. Society then scrutinizes and marginalizes those women who participate in those cross-gender role behaviors, like sports, because they are not being feminine.

Krane goes on to talk about the idea that hegemonic gender roles, hegemonic femininity and masculinity, are connected to stereotypes that sustain sexism and oppress women. She states that “females are psychologically conditioned not to pursue the kind of autonomous development that is held by the culture to be a constitutive feature of masculinity. Thus, women who conform to traditional notions of femininity will not engage in physically demanding activities nor will they be too independent, courageous, or outspoken” (117). Because sport is defined by masculine standards, the cultural practices within sport conflict with hegemonic femininity. This means that many women in today’s society try to stay away from physically demanding activities like sports because it causes them to be seen as not feminine. When they do break those traditional notions of femininity, they are marginalized and seen as masculine. To go with this, sports that require a lot of physical strength and substantial mass or musculature are socially constructed as masculine activities and thus not open to females. This is because women are expected to conform to hegemonic femininity and men with hegemonic masculinity.

Krane, however, addresses the fact that there are some women who choose to participate in sports that are still seen as feminine in society. She states that “hegemonic femininity reinforces this narrowly defined margin of acceptability. Sportswomen who carefully negotiate this margin are amply rewarded. When a heterosexual, feminine persona and body are cultivated, women are more likely to receive benefits such as media attention, endorsements, fan approval, and reduced heterosexist discrimination” (118). When women stay thin, pretty, and submissive while participating in their sport, they are likely to be much more accepted into society. Krane argues that “athletes who ignore the social mores to be feminine pay a price for it” (118). This means that the women who choose to be aggressive, competitive, and muscular in sports and drop their feminine role are the ones who are marginalized and not accepted in society.

Judith Butler is another scholar who discusses the idea of hegemonic femininity. She agrees with a lot of Vikki Krane’s ideas, but she has a different perspective on this topic. She talks about a framework for understanding how
hegemonic femininity is constructed and reproduced in women’s sport. Butler “theorizes gender as a performative act; individuals engage in (i.e., perform) behaviors that are considered consistent with their gender” (139). However, she further theorizes that this idea is not necessarily exclusively a voluntary performance. As she stated, “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, 139). Western society has certain cultural guidelines as to how women and men should act. Individuals who do not conform to these guidelines and break them are punished though negative social sanction. This concept informs our understanding of the construction of femininity in sport—though it is femininity that is the performative act. Women in sports know the social expectations of looking and acting feminine and they also know the consequences of not appearing feminine. Because of this knowledge, Butler states that women “perform femininity, consistently reiterating or reproducing hegemonic femininity in sport. Because females are socialized to act in a feminine manner, many believe that portraying a feminine appearance is natural” (121).

The Issue in Context

When I decided I wanted to interview long distance runners, I contacted fifteen women who I knew from high school and college who are still competitively running long distance. To give some background context, I asked each participant to talk about her history of running. Their answers varied, but I noticed that they all talked about their passion for running. One person stated, “I began running and joined the track team when I was a freshman in high school. When I first started running I was interested in sprinting. But as I continued with track I kept increasing my distance. I actually started to really enjoy the longer events. Now I can’t imagine anything shorter than what I run now (which is anything between the 800 to the mile). This summer I completed a half-marathon. I already want to do another one! I honestly can’t imagine my life without running.” Another said, “I started running when I was in 7th grade. My sister ran track, so I thought I should give it a try because I knew she loved it and it looked fun. Before track I was a soccer player, so sprinting was my first choice for choosing a specialty on the track. As I trained my coaches noticed I had potential as a distance runner. Also, maybe because my sister was a distance runner, they thought it ran in the family. So, to test it out they had me run the 800-meter in the time trial. I dreaded every moment of it, but I ended up beating everyone on my team. This sparked an interest in me and I fell in love with the idea of distance running. Later on, my sister and I ran a 5k together and I had to walk some of it, and my time was almost double what I get now. However, I did it and it made me want to do more. The next year in eighth grade I ran cross country and did track. I was the star of the team, and it was amazing. I was doing so well I was asked to move up to varsity in eighth grade for indoor track. I loved every moment of it. The competition was bigger, and the team was so much fun to be around. From then on, I ran cross country, indoor track, outdoor track, then back to summer training for XC. Now I run cross country in college and still train in the offseason. Running has now just become a part of me and I will never give it up.” One last person stated, “I cannot remember a time where I was not running. I began at a young age and I have now been running for over half of my life. I have been running cross country and track competitively since seventh grade and now
on a collegiate team. I’ve had an up-and-down relationship with running. I’ve thought of quitting multiple times in my career, but as of now I believe I have found my perfect balance for loving running and knowing when I am doing too much.” These were just three out of the fifteen responses, but they summarize the interviewees’ history with running.

When interviewing all of these women, I did not want to just jump right into the idea of body image, so I started by asking them general questions and focused on why they run. I thought that if I asked them why they run, they would be able to give me information to ask them to expand. One woman said, “I run because it is a great stress relief. I stay fit and running with your friends is a great way to spend some quality time talking to one another. I started running because my fifth-grade teacher said that I looked like a runner, and she thought it would be fun. I went to one of ‘the older girls’ races and instantly fell in love.” Another claimed, “I run for the competition, staying fit, and for the exploration of places that you necessarily cannot go by car. From about the age of nine or ten, I was competing in one-mile races and I was beating kids in my age group by a decent length, which is why my parents made it almost mandatory for me to go out and run every day.” A third said, “I started running and run now for very different reasons it seems. When I started, I was a very energetic, tiny, little girl who could just fly on the track. I loved my team so much. I was like everyone’s little sister and the encouragement I got was a confidence booster. My teammates made every day worth keep going. I loved long distance days because it usually meant goofing off a little bit and going on adventures. I am a huge lover of competition and because I was so little I had no real pressure on me to do well.

Running is so individual I could show my true potential and enjoy the pure satisfaction of finishing a race. As I got older it became my stress reliever. I still loved the competition, but I also had expectations from coaches and other teammates to do well at every meet. The pressure on me grew and it was hard to focus so much on it because school got tougher and I could not goof off as much. But I got more serious and trained harder, pushing myself more and more. I wanted to win more but it slowly started to feel like a job more than for fun like how I started. Now in college, I told myself I need to just run for fun. However, that did not go so well, and the competition is back. My idea of running has also changed. I find I do it to stay more in shape than for fun. I used to just do it because it was enjoyable but now I feel like I have to do it to stay in shape. It has become my own addiction for looking good. As I got older I got this idea that I want to look physically appealing to people and running seems to be how I can do that. When I look back at it, when I was little I never thought about body shape at all and ate whatever. Now I feel I have to run to maintain a good body shape, so I can eat somewhat whatever I want.”

All of the participants who I interviewed had many good reasons for why they want to run. The answers varied from it being a stress reliever to it being a good social activity. Everyone had their own, strong ideas as to why they run. One thing they all had in common, however, was the desire to stay fit. Every single person included that they run because they want to stay in shape or stay fit. When I heard that these people ran to stay in shape, I preceded to ask them what being in shape meant to them. One person said that “being in shape means that I am completely tone (hardly any fat content), I can run thirteen
miles with ease, and I do not feel any pain when running. I am thin but yet can run any distance easily.” Another person stated that “being in shape means being thin and fit and more active than the rest of the population around me. It means having a lean body shape and being able to do really well with running.” Lastly, another person said that “being in shape means more to me than it probably should. I love the feeling of being in shape and have people notice me and think of me as attractive. Sometimes I do think I take it to the extreme though. For example, if I do not run one day I will try to eat less, or if I don’t I feel really disgusted with myself and I try to do some sort of exercise to make up for it.”

These responses were all very similar because they talk about the idea that being in shape means looking really thin but yet being able to perform very well with running. In “Elite Athletes: Effects of the Pressure to be Thin,” Susan Byrne and Neil McLean focus on the idea that female athletes have been identified as a group who are subject to intense pressures to conform to an ideal body shape. Athletes face the same pressure as most people in society face: to conform to a social ideal that women need to be lean and physically fit. In addition to this pressure, they also face extra pressures from within their sport to achieve and maintain a certain body shape. This is what I feel is happening with the women that I interviewed. They want to be in shape for society, meaning thin and lean, but yet they also want to be in shape when it comes to running, meaning they are able to run far distances at ease and at a good pace. This can be a real conflict for them.

Byrne and McLean state that athletes participate in a competitive culture, so more and more pressure is placed on them to manipulate their eating and weight in order to maximize their performance. The pressure from within that sport, however, is likely to be even more intense for athletes competing in sports with weight restrictions or sports that require a lean body shape or a low body weight such as ballet, gymnastics, or distance running. To go into more detail, the authors state that studies have shown that if athletes are subject to these social and sport pressures, they might develop eating disorders to help with their body image. Athletes competing in sports that place a strong emphasis on leanness or a low body weight have an even higher rate of eating problems and body image issues. Byrne and McLean conducted their own study to examine the effect of pressure to achieve and maintain an ideal body shape on the eating attitudes and behavior of elite athletes:

Descriptive data confirmed that athletes competing in sports that emphasize a lean body shape, or a low body weight perceived themselves to be subject to the most intense pressure to be thin, followed by normal-build athletes and then non-athletes. In addition, overall and within each group, females perceived that they were subject to more intense pressure than males to conform to a lean body ideal. In line with this continuum effect, the groups who perceived themselves to be subject to increased pressure to achieve a lean body shape showed higher rates of eating problems. (87)

These authors believe that there is a threshold for social pressure in regard to eating disorders. They state that at some point on the continuum of perceived pressure there lies a threshold, beyond which the manifestation of an eating disorder is more likely to occur, and thin-
build athletes exceed that threshold. They also said that aggravating factors such as low self-esteem or high levels of perfectionism or competitiveness also work to heighten the effects of the social pressure to be thin when you are an athlete. Their findings coincide with the responses of the athletes I interviewed. Although the scholars talk about the idea of eating disorders and none of the athletes interviewed mentioned having one, they do have some tendencies. For example, one person stated that if she does not go for a run one day, she will try to eat less that way so that she can stay thin. This is not an eating disorder, but it is certainly an eating problem. These athletes want to be able to run fast and far for their sport, but they also want to look good for society, so they will skip meals or take in less calories just so then they can stay thin and feminine in appearance.

This obsession can lead to so many problems, especially in the sport of running. Maria-Christina Kosteli is another researcher who focuses on the idea of sport types and body image in female athletes. In her article, “Relationship Between Sport Type and Body Image of Female Athletes,” she talks about the idea that athletes involved in certain sports, such as gymnastics and distance running, are at risk for body image disturbances. She states that in Western social norms, extremely thin women are the ones who are found particularly feminine and attractive. Women who internalize the social ideal of attractiveness but do not meet it often become dissatisfied with their bodies. Kosteli says that research has indicated that body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are even more prevalent because of the pressure to maintain and have a specific athletic build as well as maintain and have the social pressure to be thin.

In her article, Kosteli addresses the idea that she had interviewed many different female collegiate athletes who were about 20 years old participating in a variety of college varsity sports including cross-country distance running and track and field. She found these athletes had developed dual and mismatched identities:

[They] expressed pride in their strong athletic bodies, but they said that other people perceived them to be different from normal women and that their large athletic bodies were not attractive to men. Not surprisingly, some female athletes report that they experience a paradox, wanting to achieve the societal ideal of an ultrathin body while at the same time working to develop a strong and muscular body for optimal sport performance.

Kosteli also found that a lot of these female athletes compared themselves to professional models to determine what society wanted them to look like. She believes that the paradox that many female athletes are facing is because of the social comparison theory, which basically says that individuals base their self-evaluations on the comparisons they make between themselves and others, especially those to whom they are similar in a particular domain (Kosteli). Kosteli cites a study that found:

elite athletes tended to compare themselves to other elite athletes, professional models tended to compare themselves to other models, and college students tended to compare themselves to other people in general.
Further, they found that the more female athletes compared themselves to professional models, the more body image concerns they expressed. Thus, it is not surprising that participation in sports that emphasize the importance of a thin body shape or a low body weight has been linked to elevated body dissatisfaction. (66)

I also saw some of these ideas in the interviews when I asked the athletes what goes on in their mind while they are running. Many of the athletes’ answers addressed this idea of the double standard of maintaining and having a specific athletic build, as well as maintaining and having the social pressure to be thin. For example, one athlete stated,

When I run I always look for an opportunity to push myself. Whether it’s pushing myself to go up every hill I encounter fast, doing a random speed play in my runs, or going an extra minute, I always tell myself just one more. Sometimes it is hard training for looking good and for competition. Having a strong core is so important to racing fast. When you look at Olympic athletes though, their cores are huge and it kind of makes them look fat. Fit, but not curvy. So, I will usually tend to look up Victoria Secret model body workouts and do those instead. I would say I am kind of holding myself back by not getting the right abs I need for competition, but I am working towards the body shape I want society to see because it looks more appealing.

This athlete stated that she wants to have a core because that will make her a better runner, but she does not want a core that stands out too much, so she will look up Victoria Secret ab workouts to complete so she can look more like what society wants women to look like. Another athlete answered, “Getting in shape: this sucks, why am I doing this... but I have to do this or I’ll get fat and people will judge me.” This is what she thinks when she is running. Her response matches what Kosteli argues when she writes that women who internalize the social ideal of attractiveness but do not meet it often become dissatisfied with their bodies. This athlete says that sometimes when she runs, she hates it, but she has to run so that she does not get fat. She has internalized that social ideal of attractiveness which now causes her to not like her body. She feels as though she needs to run to not get fat, so society will not judge her, even though if she did not run, she would not necessarily become fat.

Another athlete answered this question in a different sort of way. When asked what goes on in her mind when running, she responded, “When I am training, I am thinking about what I can do to make myself the best I can be. Sometimes I think there is a double standard when it comes to running. I think people expect great runners to be fit and very petite because that is was society sees as a good female. What society doesn’t know is that great runners look different than the ideal female.” This athlete came right out and stated that there is a double standard for runners. She believes that society wants women to look a certain way, but that is not what female runners should look like. Female runners need to be built with muscle. Society’s ideal female body is too thin and weak to be a great, successful runner. This double standard addressed in the earlier and previous responses is shown in the question I asked about body image. I wanted to know whether issues of body image have been a part of their mindsets during their running career. One athlete stated, “I’m never skinny enough for my liking and I want to just stop running.
altogether to try to escape it. But I cannot stop because I have to run. When I don’t run, I get fat and feel gross. When I run myself to the ground that is when I am happy about my body image. I want to train hard to be the best runner on the team, but I also want to be skinny. My goal is to be the skinniest on the team, so I am the prettiest.” Just sitting there listening to her say that was devastating. I was sitting across from a beautiful, fit collegiate athlete as she proceeded to tell me how she just wants to be skinny. She runs so she does not feel fat. She runs so that she does not feel gross. She runs so that she can get skinner and skinner to be the ‘prettiest’ in her mind. Another athlete said something very similar. She stated,

Even though I run I still try to monitor what I eat. I try to eat healthy because it makes me look fit. Running used to be my excuse to eat a lot and sweets but now it’s really just to look good and as a stress reliever. I think what changed was my life got harder and more stressful and just what society expects or likes has changed my mind. When you’re little you don’t understand those things and no pressure is on you. However, as I get older I am finding more expectations and harsher of a society. It is now stuck in my head that I have to be skinny to get places in life. Even though that should not be true, society makes it that way. If I am too skinny, though, I will not get places on the track.

These two athletes talk about how they want to be really good runners and be the best they can be, but they also want to fit into society and be the prettiest they can be. It was actually really hard for me to listen to these runners talk and say these things. If you were to look at these girls, you would see confident young women. When you actually start to talk to them, though, you realize how this double standard they are facing is affecting them. These girls want to run and be fast and fit, but society is telling them to look and act different. It was so hard to hear “it is now stuck in my head that I have to be skinny to get places in life.” Just think about it. Here, you have a nineteen-year-old girl who used to love running but now runs because society has led her to believe being skinny and pretty is the only way she can get places in life. That is just heartbreaking.

In Vikki Krane’s article, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To? Challenging Hegemonic Femininity in Women’s Sport,” she addresses ideas similar to how these runners responded. For example, one of the athletes said that she feels as if she has to be skinny in order to get places in life. In Krane’s article, she states:

The underlying message is that athleticism and femininity are contradictory, and females have to go out of their way to show that they can be athletic and be socially accepted... Generally, women who appear heterosexually feminine are privileged over women perceived as masculine. Consequences of nonconformity to hegemonic femininity in sport often include sexist and heterosexist discrimination. This leads many sportswomen to emphasize feminine characteristics to avoid prejudice and discrimination. However, females perceived as too feminine are then sexualized and trivialized, leaving women to carefully balance athleticism with hegemonic femininity. (115)

This means that women in sports have two things to focus on with their body. They...
need to be feminine, but also muscular for their sport. On one hand, if they are too muscular they will be discriminated against. This is what the athlete was talking about. She needs to be thin in order to get things in life and be successful in society. The article, however, states that if female athletes are too feminine, they will not be seen as an athlete. The women that I interviewed alluded to this idea as well. If they are not fit enough, they will not be seen as a successful athlete. One of the athletes stated that if she is too skinny she will not get places on the track. One of the biggest things Krane talks about in her article is the idea that a lot of women in sports focus on saying and demonstrating that they can be athletes and be feminine at the same time. The goal is to present female athletes as attractive and having them actively profess their femininity and heterosexuality. In her article, Krane begins to move toward and discuss the idea of heteronormativity and its relationship to hegemonic femininity. The concern is not only about body image, but about how appearing too masculine can, and will, send a potential signal about homosexuality.

Highlighting the “feminine” aspects of women’s sport presents female athletes as culturally acceptable women even though they play sports. One female athlete that demonstrates femininity is Mia Hamm, a U.S. national soccer player, who endorsed shampoo and asserted her concern that her hair needs to look just right when on the field. An example of a sports team as a whole that seeks to exhibit femininity while participating in sport is the Canadian national ice hockey team wearing pink and white uniforms for the first world championship for women’s hockey in 1990. The problem with all these gestures, though, according to Krane, is that women have to go out of their way to show that they can be athletic and be socially accepted. Within women’s sport environments, women continue policing themselves, emphasizing the importance of balancing the perceptions of masculine athleticism with feminine appearance. They need to learn how to balance feminine and less feminine characteristics in order to be an athlete and a socially accepted female.

This concept comes back to the idea that Judith Butler has about performing femininity. Butler states that femininity is a performative act. Women in sports know the social expectations of looking and acting feminine and they also know the consequences of not appearing feminine. Because of this knowledge, Butler states that women “perform femininity, consistently reiterating or reproducing hegemonic femininity in sport. Because females are socialized to act in a feminine manner, many believe that portraying a feminine appearance is natural” (121). Again, the idea is that women need to learn how to balance feminine and less feminine characteristics in order to be an athlete and a socially accepted female. Krane discusses how women in sports need to conform and be sure they maintain a heterosexually feminine appearance. She states that if women do not do this in their sport and appear more masculine than what is acceptable, they will be subjected to “negative treatment by administrators and coaches, verbal harassment by fans, lack of media attention and endorsements, sexist and heterosexist prejudice, and even negative bias by officials or judges during competition” (122). This means that masculine women in sports do not get treated well. To back up her claim, she included a recent study done by Riita Pirinen, who analyzed the intersection of femininity and heterosexuality in magazine representations of Finnish female
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Olympians. Pirinen found that women who look feminine and who had unquestionable heterosexual identifications – like having husbands, boyfriends, and/or children – were treated differently than women who did not look feminine, or who were single women and/or lesbians (122).

Female athletes with a “feminine-looking female body” were presented as acceptable, whereas female athletes with a “masculine-looking female body” were framed as unacceptable. Further, the media highlighted the private lives of heterosexual athletes through a representation of the husbands and children or boyfriends. Female athletes who did not have boyfriends or husbands were rendered invisible by the media.

Pirinen concluded that athletic women with feminine bodies and who were overtly heterosexual were privileged and accepted by society, while athletic women with masculine bodies and who did not overtly interact with a male companion were marginalized. Krane then stated that Pirinen’s findings were consistent with media studies of female athletes in the United States, making this privileging of heteronormativity and hegemonic femininity very prevalent.

Krane also addresses the idea that women in sports must balance the traits essential for athletic success with a presentation of an acceptable appearance conforming to the heterosexist norms of society. They must be physically and mentally strong, yet also look like the image that is perceived as feminine that society deems acceptable. She then goes on to say that “female athletes must contend with an athletic body that is necessary to meet their sport goals yet one that also is contrary to societal standards of the ideal female body” (123). In the sport, they need to be muscular and fit, but when they are not playing their muscular bodies are perceived as masculine. She states that “the female players faced a nearly no-win situation. On one hand, men (in particular) denigrated them for not being as big and strong and playing as well as their male counterparts. On the other hand, if men found the quality of play acceptable, they criticized the women’s behavior and looks as ‘masculine’” (123).

I believe what Krane stated is very true and can be backed up with the interviews I conducted. When she stated that female players face a paradox, this is exactly what the athletes described. One athlete stated that “the ideal runner’s body is having a six pack and muscular quads and an overall skinny physique. The ideal female body, from what I gather from society, is having larger breasts and a butt, nice hair and a nice face. Runners do not always have the biggest extremities, so that makes me feel more self-conscious about my body because I definitely look and feel like a distance runner.” What this runner is describing is a no-win situation for female athletes because women who run need a body that is necessary to meet their sporting goal, yet that body operates in contrast to social standards of the ideal female body. Both ideals are completely different. You cannot physically have both. This is what causes a lot of the anxiety and pressures females face when they choose to be a female athlete.

The Importance

All of the women who I interviewed stated at one point or another that they loved running. Some said it was because it was a stress relief, others said it was because it was a good way to hang out with friends and be social. One person even said she loved to run because it allowed her to “explore places that you necessarily cannot go by car.” When I dug further, though,
each and every one of these women, whether they were sixteen or fifty, said that they also run in order to stay physically appealing to society. These women run because they love running and love how they feel about themselves when they run, but there is an opposing notion of what it means to be attractive and valuable in our culture that seems to be at odds with this. Being a woman in today’s society means you need to be attractive, submissive, and feminine, so when women do run, they run not only for their own personal gain, but for society.

Vikki Krane states that she believes women need to try and push these ideas and challenge and resist the social norms. She states that women are the agents that are capable of resisting and changing the idea of hegemonic femininity. She states in her article that “although the norm in women’s sport perpetuates hegemonic femininity, there is resistance to it. Three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, groups of athletic females directly challenge hegemonic femininity: (a) muscular and physically assertive female athletes, (b) feminist sport participants, and (c) lesbian athletes” but every female athlete can take part of this resistance (124). She believes that women’s psychological well-being requires women to form new ideas of perceiving their bodies by having their ideas uncontrolled by hegemonic femininity. As women participate in sports, they will develop muscles and strength. They will run not because they want to please society, but rather because they want to destress and go on adventures. Women should not be embarrassed by any of this. Rather, they should be proud. Krane stated that women “must learn to enjoy and appreciate their bodies rather than focus on how to mold them into some semblance of the feminine ideal female body” (129). She then went on to say that women should be able to respect the natural shape and size of their body and resist the need to manipulate it. They also need to value their ability to develop large muscles and to engage in highly physical sports. Society is putting female athletes in a box that limits them from doing what they love. If women can learn to just enjoy and love their bodies the way they are rather than trying to focus on fitting a certain mold, maybe society can get rid of this double standard so many female athletes face. In fact, it’s not even just about the women anymore. It is about all of society. If people can start loving their bodies and others’ bodies, we would not be sticking people into boxes, limiting them from doing what they want to do. If society accepted people’s bodies, everyone would be allowed to do what they are passionate about and do it for the right reasons.

Jenny Thompson, a five-time Olympic gold medalist, stands as a good role model for female athletes to take after. In a recent interview, she stated, “I’m becoming comfortable with whom I am and the way I look. I like my muscles now. I look this way for a reason; my body has a purpose—it helps me achieve my goals. Female athletes are strong, but that’s what makes us beautiful” (Krane, 129). This is what all female athletes need to believe. Female athletes are strong, but that’s what makes them beautiful.

References
Body Image in Long Distance Runners
