

To Be The Golden Girl:  
Disordered Eating Within Figure  
Skating

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## To Be The Golden Girl: Disordered Eating Within Figure Skating

### Introduction

“You said to yourself, ‘Oh my God, she’s gorgeous. She looks like a movie star. She has such joie de vivre.’ Then you ask yourself what happened to that. I hope she can find happiness,” Gracie Gold’s former coach Frank Carroll (Brennan, 2017).

Frank Carroll’s statement embodies the hegemonic ideology of femininity that is expected of competitors in aesthetic sports. He is the former coach of Olympic figure skater, Gracie Gold, who recently revealed that she was withdrawing from skating to seek treatment for depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder (Armour, 2017). Carroll unexpectedly parted ways with Gracie during a media statement—before personally informing her—after her poor performances throughout 2016 and 2017 (Hersh, 2017). His unsolicited statement equates beauty with happiness; more importantly, his ignorance reveals that many of the issues that occur behind the scenes for these athletes go undetected. Furthermore, many weight pressures figure skaters encounter are from coach comments. The abrupt end to their relationship implicitly suggests that Gold may have lost support from Carroll during her weight struggles, as he has been cited as the coach who does not deal with emotion (Madison, 2014). Frank Carroll’s statements set the precedent for the weight pressures figure skaters face, a dreary fact that has largely been hidden from mass media until Gold’s statements.

Gracie Gold is quoted in *USA Today* saying, “You don’t often see – there aren’t that many – you just don’t see overweight figure skaters for a reason” (Brennan, 2017). Gracie Gold’s statements hint how there is only one type of figure skater: lean, beautiful, and poised. The “ideal figure skater” has been constituted throughout the sport’s history through coaches and athletes alike. For example, in Canada, where figure skating is highly revered as a professional

sport, the legacy of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Olympian Barbara Ann Scott remains to this day. A male coach described Scott as “noteworthy for her “Hollywood star looks,” and he discussed how “she serves as a model for young skaters” (McGarry, 2005). Scott is praised by coaches to this day and used as an example for young girls; this is not for her athleticism, but for her appearance, politeness, and how perfectly she exemplifies proper feminine qualities. Messages and figures like these imply that leanness and hegemonic femininity equate to beauty and success—aesthetic sport is heavily weighted towards appearance. Females are nearly required to exhibit the feminine standards of a slender body, beautiful appearance, and a respectable *lack* of masculine features (Musto & McGann, 2016). Women who compete in aesthetic sports like figure skating, gymnastics, and dance, face these intense expectations from coaches, audiences, and the media. Thin ideals become even more problematic at with high levels athletics, where bodies require fuel in order to function properly; many figures skaters train for multiple hours every day. Hours of training coupled with pressures to fit an ideal can be detrimental to the mind and body, which is something Gracie alludes to in her media comments. These expectations are especially problematic because the very idea of femininity is socially constructed, causing these ideologies to be embedded into our society and difficult to escape. Ultimately, stringent ideals can manifest into attitudes and habits that lead to internal battles, including disordered eating patterns.

This investigation of body ideals in aesthetic sports and representation of female athletes in the media is inspired by Olympic Figure Skater Gracie Gold’s recent statements of her withdrawal from the Grand Prix Series in order to seek treatment for anxiety, depression, and an eating disorder (Carlson, 2017). In America, at least 20 million women and 10 million men will suffer from an eating disorder during their lives (“What are Eating Disorders?”, 2017). These numbers are only an estimate, as many disordered behaviors go unreported due to shame and

stigma. Unfortunately, issues like eating disorders in sports have not received enough media attention; when they do, the outcome is less than adequate. Representations are adequate because they seldom occur and often portrayed as abnormal, something to be ashamed of, and an emotional obstacle that can be overcome. In reality, eating disorders and mental health are much more complicated than that, and remain a huge issue—especially amongst athletes. Gendered discourse within figure skating implicitly pressures skaters to negotiate between their feminine and athletic identities, creating a thin culture that drives them towards disordered behavior.

## **Literature Review**

### *Gender and Sports: Female Athlete Representation in the Media*

Elite female athletes are more susceptible to developing eating disorders compared to the general population (Sundgot-Borgen, Jorunn, & Torstveit, 2004). Furthermore, various athletes have demonstrated disordered behaviors, regardless of the type of sport—though sports that place emphasis on weight for heightened performance have witnessed a higher prevalence of eating disorders (Currie, 2010). Coaches place a lot of emphasis on weight in relation to success for these athletes. With social and cultural pressures to be thin, along with the added stress of media representations of female athletes, it becomes understandable why so many athletes develop poor relationships with body image and food.

Additionally, it has been found that women do not have equal representation in the media. In the last 26 years, women's sports are included in only two-percent of ESPN coverage (V, 2016). Distinctly, the Olympics have more coverage of women's sports, with 58 percent coverage during the first week of the 2016 Olympics; nonetheless, women are still talked about differently (V, 2016). A University of Cambridge report found that men were described more based on their ability using words like “fastest,” “strong,” and “big”; conversely, women were

more likely to be described with terms like “pregnant,” “aged,” and “married.” (“Aesthetics over athletics...”, 2016). A focus on appearance makes female athletes more aware of appearance, and potentially more self-conscious, especially when being analyzed by their looks rather than their skill.

Media perpetuate hegemonic ideals for both males and females; also notable is the difference in language used regarding men and women, especially in sports. There is a lack of representation in the media of strong, female, athletic figures. Overall, in media coverage women experience significantly less coverage in comparison to men (Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012). That being said, women do receive more equitable coverage during the Olympics: however they are still often represented differently than men (Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2010; Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). Studies have shown that most media coverage focuses on the personal lives and appearance of women; meanwhile, for men the media focuses on their strength and athletic abilities (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). In an analysis of 1990s *Sports Illustrated* articles, it was found that women were described based on their looks to a greater extent than their abilities (Lumpkin, 2009). Discrepancies between men and women are fluid throughout general media coverage and Olympic coverage, even though women receive more coverage than normal during the Olympics. An analysis of broadcaster commentary during the 2008 Games found the same differences as those present in the *Sports Illustrated* study—women are regarded more based on their personal life and appearance, while men receive more recognition of their size, strength, and ability (Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2010). Interestingly but not surprisingly, sports like beach volleyball and aesthetic sports are the female sports with the most coverage during the Olympics (Billings, Angelini, MacArthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014). This may be accredited to the fact that these sports are more popular, which may be simply

because they receive more media coverage. Arguably, beach volleyball with tiny suits and aesthetic sports with form fitting costumes and beauty aspects are considered more “feminine,” making them more popular and prioritized by the media. In a way, they re-inscribe traditional notions of femininity, appealing more to the female identity in the negotiation between feminine and athlete identities. This also makes these types of sports “safer” than say women playing basketball or hockey, which do not as readily fit the status quo of gender norms.

Regardless of the reasoning, the media framing women as more emotional and presenting stories focused on personal lives and appearance ignore the importance of athleticism. This not only sends out a wrong message to audiences, but also places a pressure on female athletes to negotiate between their athletic and feminine identities. As a result, it is unsurprising that many elite athletes fall into disordered behavior due to the constant stress and attention put on these distinct identities. It is vital to change media language regarding females and athletics to detach them from the gender binaries that create issues to this day. Figure skating is a prime example of appropriate femininity exhibited by female athletes.

The world of figure skating is known for its dazzling costumes, graceful dances on the ice, and inherently feminine qualities. Along with this reputation comes an emphasis on leanness, as that is what is thought of as beautiful and *necessary* in the sport. In aesthetic sports like figure skating, gymnastics, and dance, there is an extra expectation to be lean and graceful, because these qualities are thought to add to performance (Reel, Petrie, Soohoo, & Anderson, 2013). Furthermore, thinness is an esteemed feminine quality portrayed in the media for decades. This standard transcends all groups of females, but increasingly impacts female athletes, as their often-muscular statures do not entirely fit into the feminine norm. The language used to describe women in the media tends to *subtly* depict body type expectations. Consequently, there is a lack

of everyday discourse regarding the troublesome portrayal of females and the “feminine” body in the media. Thus, it is important to review the literature regarding how body image is portrayed in the media.

*Body Image and the Media: Female Representations and its Impact*

For women in general, there is evidence that media exposure greatly contributes to perceptions of the ideal body and a subsequent pressure to be thin (Harrison, 2000). Elite athletes may face an extra layer of stress beyond competition and practice, with media consumption. A study on female Division 1 Female Athletes and entertainment media found a significant positive relationship between media consumption of lean sports, drive for thinness, and prevalence of bulimia (Bissell, 2004). Without proper representation of female athletes in the media, most female figures shown fit stereotypical feminine ideals. The popular *Sports Illustrated* magazine was found to have only six percent of images showing female athletes (Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003). Besides this, there are not adequate portrayals of *strong* female athletes acting as athletes. Rather, they are typically depicted in bikinis or as sexual objects. During the Olympics, aesthetic sports like figure skating and gymnastics receive the most media coverage compared to other female sports and team sports (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). This is foreseeable, with this sector of athletics epitomizes inherently feminine qualities and idealizes the female body. As a result, the majority of media characterization of females, athletic or not, remain within the realm of appropriate and hegemonic femininity. This lack of diversity is problematic, as it does set the standard as to what the ideal female is supposed to look like, creating unrealistic expectations for women of both athletic and nonathletic populations.

Media depictions of females pressure the ideal of thinness; more recently, there has been an increase in fitness movements, making a thin *and* fit body an ideal (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). As a result, this does make athletic, lean female bodies a part of the standard—but this figure is extremely difficult to maintain, requiring strenuous training and carefully calculated nutrition, often leading to a lack of nutrition. Nonetheless, the increased media attention towards “fit” as ideal places a certain pressure on athletes who are covered in the news media to embody it. For example, white adolescent females who viewed lean athlete sports were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies (Harrison & Frederickson, 2003). Media attention on hyper-feminine qualities and sexualizing the female body fosters attitudes of what is acceptable in society, based on the premise of George Gerbner’s cultivation theory. Cultivation theory posits “the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewers conceptions of social reality” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180). An increase in thinness ideals portrayed in general media, along with idealization of lean sports, can internalize attitudes of what body is expected of females. This contributes to the constant negotiation of identities that female athletes must engage in, between performance and being viewed as socially desirable. Especially once entering into the spotlight as an elite athlete, media messages and messages from coaches and other top performers embed the lean body ideal. As a result, elite female athletes are faced with this need to fit everyone else’s expectations—proving that they are feminine and lean, while also performing well and maintaining strength (Mean & Kassing, 2008). Top competitors usually do whatever it takes to be the best, to receive praise, fans, and sponsors. Thus, the internalization of media thin and lean stereotypes and standards of females may place pressure on athletes to be fit, culminating into serious body image dissatisfaction that may manifest as eating disorders, ultimately deteriorating mental and physical health.

## Methodological Discussion

I will be using feminist methodologies to evaluate media discussion of Gracie Gold before and after her announcement of suffering from depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder. In discussing *why* the public has reacted in a given way to Gold's statement, it is necessary to consider the ideological underpinnings of how figure skaters' identity is tied into socially constructed gender norms. For this reason, feminist methodologies and theories are beneficial, with their purpose being "to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Therefore, analyzing the rhetoric that constitutes the figure skater and female identity through a feminist lens enables identification of the cultural norms that perpetuate certain stereotypes. Critically analyzing media coverage of Gracie Gold can display language usage and terminology that maintains feminine norms. Identifying gender as socially constructed allows us to see the constraints placed on both women and men to fit into a certain hegemonic mold.

Gender is not natural; rather, it is a socially constructed phenomenon, which is an important tenet that poststructural feminists embrace. While earlier feminist movements—such as first-wave and second-wave—focused more on rights and liberation, poststructural feminists focus on the barriers that gender creates. The manner in which "[feminist] ideas [invite] questions that [can] take us beyond the surface of our culturally shared commonsense understandings of the world" is deeply thought provoking (Gavey, 2011, p. 184). Specifically, such a position strives to eliminate gender binaries, in which an individual can only be defined as distinctly female or distinctly male (Davies, Browne, Grannon, Hopkins, Mccann, & Wihlborg,

2006, p. 65). Through reliance on gender binaries, channels like the media can subtly reinforce norms without explicitly stating ideals; for example, women are often praised when thin and submissive, while men should be burly and dominant. Though not all media are the same, an overarching theme throughout much of history emphasizes hegemonic male and female ideals. Hegemony is “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971). The goal of feminist rhetorical analysis is to identify the discourse that perpetuates these standards and uncover the subtle ways that they become engrained in our minds through consistent exposure (Dow, 2016, p. 71). Though in our current society women may have more rights than they did at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we are not past oppressive times. The body is constantly analyzed as a site through which society defines a woman’s worth. Therefore, while strides have been taken towards securing women’s rights, we are still very much so living in a patriarchal society. The goal of feminism is to fight against the domination of patriarchal ideals that oppress individuals implicitly. In the case of female athletes, this means addressing the norm of the dainty and thin female.

Feminist criticism is the most suitable lens for evaluating media discourse about female athletes—particularly Gracie Gold—because this discourse tends to highlight feminine aspects while downplaying athletic aspects. Furthermore, sports are rooted in hegemonic masculinity, making female athletes in many cases go against the status quo. Therefore, it is beneficial to analyze Gracie Gold’s statements and media coverage of her through feminist criticism, identifying the influences of patriarchy, hegemonic femininity, and idealistic norms that can impact how women, whether an athlete or not, view their bodies.

Finally, feminist criticism is the most applicable methodology for critically analyzing female athletes and body image. Not only does it examine the explicit statements from the media, but this form of criticism can also uncover the implicit messages sent by discourses and commentary about the female body. Feminist criticism can be used to determine gendered language within discourse, such as describing women with phrases like “good looks” and men with phrases like “strong.” Furthermore, when women are depicted as “strong” there is a tendency to focus on emotional strength rather than physical strength, as seen with the emphasis on personal life (“Aesthetics Over Athletics...”, 2016). This may unveil gender binaries in which females are described with inherently feminine characteristics and males are described with inherent masculine characteristics in ways that implicitly reinforce hegemonic norms.

When Gracie Gold announced her break from the sport in the fall of 2017, her media depiction shifted from an All-American champion with movie-star good looks to someone who is damaged, but *at least* emotionally strong. But, more disappointingly, it framed her as someone who can eventually be “fixed” so that she may once again return to the sport. For this reason, I have chosen to analyze a variety of media regarding Gracie Gold’s media statements, including news articles and interviews, in addition to a forum in which users discuss her announcement.

### **The Rhetorical Situation**

Media portrayal of female athletes tends to perpetuate a patriarchal sports culture. Since the passing of Title IX in 1972, there is a misconception that females now are completely equal in the sports arena; while they certainly have more access and opportunities, there is still inequality in sports commentary and media representation of female athletes. Equality is not only fostered in the written law. In fact, seldom does law lead to true justice. Rather, equality is cultivated through every day language, images, passing statements—in discourse that may seem

miniscule to some. Implicit messages sent with these patterns are communication in and of themselves, as it often takes the critical mind to unveil them. Through subtle language use and framing, feminine standards and female athlete marginalization are continuously preserved in society.

In recent years, Gracie Gold has become notorious for her beautiful features and appeal to hyper femininity in figure skating. Gracie Gold's appearance has been paralleled to movie stars, which is not uncommon of figure skaters in the past. Further, comments have been made on her weight loss and weight gain especially throughout this year, culminating in her announcement of withdrawing from the sport until she can recover from anxiety, depression, and an eating disorder (Armour, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to review the current body of literature regarding athlete depictions in the media, in an analysis of how certain language and framing can lead to body image distortion, and thus eating disorders.

Aesthetic sports have celebrated petite, lean females for much of time; Gracie Gold's specific case was not vocalized until October 2017, but the beginnings of her struggle became apparent at the 2016 World Championships. Though she began skating amazingly, she fell a few times during her long programs, resulting in a fourth-place finish. This was a big disappointment to Gracie, as she had earned a medal at the 2014 Winter Olympics and was aiming to win World's to end a long United States women's figure skating medal drought (Zaccardi & Press, 2016). Furthermore, before her poor performance, she was in first place in the competition, so losing the title was devastating for her. In an interview right after she skated Gracie laments, "I'm really sad, and I'm really embarrassed...I feel really ashamed of how I skated and how I tried to represent my country. It just is a really, really terrible moment for me and my skating" (Zaccardi & Press, 2016). Her performance at the World's marked a clear decline in her spirits

and confidence. Though she appeared perfectly fine to most, her physical and mental struggles began to surface, leading to a downward spiral in her competitive success.

Gracie's shaky year of programs continued at Skate America in October 2016. After her unsatisfactory programs, in an interview Gold explained, "[My weight is] just not what's required for this sport. It's a lean body sport and it's just not what I have currently" (Brennan, 2017). This type of discourse is problematic, as it reinforces the idea that thin figure skaters perform the best and are more likely to be successful, both on the ice and in the media. Nonetheless, it clearly demonstrates that in 2016 Gracie Gold began to mention the pressure she felt to maintain a certain look—the figure skater identity.

Shortly after Gracie Gold's poor performances, Frank Carroll ended their relationship through a media statement, before he informed her personally. Back in 2013 Gracie moved to California in order to be coached by Frank Carroll, often regarded as notorious for his coaching of Olympic medalist Michelle Kwan (Madison, 2014). Carroll coached Gold through many of her successes in 2014, including the Sochi Olympics. His coaching style is described as business-like and straightforward. In an interview he is quoted: "I don't want to hear, you're emotionally upset. I don't want to hear, this didn't go right. I don't want whining. I want training," (Madison, 2014). He is a very straightforward coach and with skaters like Kwan and Gold, he clearly can help bring out their inner successes. Even so, this lack of emotion and perhaps understanding may be off-putting for someone going through mental obstacles. Again, his split with Gracie was announced to the media before Carroll even informed Gold—an action lacking emotion and even respect. When asked after Gold's inadequate performance at 2017 U.S. National Championships if they would still be working together, Carroll explained, "No... There will be a change... But you can't just say goodbye. It's got to be worked out intelligently and legally when we get home"

(Hersh, 2017). He announced to the media that there would be legal issues to work out since they were contractually bound. In a statement Gracie replied

I am surprised that Frank announced his decision before informing me...I continue to have the utmost respect for Frank Carroll and his legacy. He took me on during a very vulnerable time, and I am forever grateful for our work together. Despite my sadness in missing this world championships, I will benefit (from the) extra time entering the Olympic season. I plan to use it well (Hersh, 2017).

Throughout her 2016 season Gracie explained needing to cut weight pretty fast to prepare for her skates, and not being “in shape” may have caused a strain in her relationship with Carroll.

Carroll described in the interview, “I think we did a pretty good job together, and then we had one complete disaster at the end of last year (worlds), which to me wasn’t horrible, being fourth in the world and first in the short program” (Hersh, 2017). Although not explicit, Carroll’s statement makes one wonder whether Gracie’s inability to forgive herself and struggles with weight eventually caused a downward spiral ending in a public split.

When Gold commented on not having the body required for the sport, she received some backlash when journalists interpreted her statement as calling herself overweight, while she appears perfectly healthy and “normal” to most people (Nelson, 2016; Hendricks, 2016). Nonetheless, figure skaters have the identity of being graceful “ice princesses” who are beautiful to watch and look at; Gracie’s lack of positive self talk shows she did not feel that she fit the stringent mold. Gold’s 2016 interview contributes to her personal narrative that eventually become public throughout the past year, revealing that body image and weight pressures resulted in an eating disorder and subsequent mental issues. Gracie admitted that she had lost a lot of weight in a short period of time before that World’s performance, and her loss of the title

culminated into subpar performances for the rest of 2016 (Brennan, 2017). On October 13, 2017, Gracie announced that she was withdrawing from the Grand Prix season due to her mental struggles and eating disorder (Armour, 2017). Furthermore, she did not compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics, in order to work on healing herself internally and gaining her confidence back.

Before Gracie Gold revealed her struggles in October of this year, she alluded to the fact that many figure skaters suffer from body image issues and disordered eating patterns. In an interview with *Today* back in July, she stated “It’s important for our sport to be rather wiry and lean because of what we do...A lot of us struggle with [weight issues]” (Murray, 2017). Gold explained that constantly being in the spotlight is stressful for figure skaters because it is such an aesthetic sport, and part of the expectation is to have a thin frame. Her interview with *Today* was a response to previous comments she made about her body shape, making people speculate that she “blame[d] her weight for her fifth-place finish at Skate America” (Murray, 2017). Her statements sparked an increase in discourse about the mental and physical battles that figure skaters face, and she has not been the first to speak out about eating struggles. Despite this, very few female athletes have opened up about eating disorders.

Though not widely discussed, figure skating has been under speculation for manifesting disordered eating for a while. An interview with former Olympian Jenny Kirk reveals that approximately “85% of figure skaters struggle with eating disorders” (Coker, 2010). Kirk explains that although figure skaters are not required to be a certain weight, there is a certain expectation of preparedness based on appearance, including supposed leanness. Thus, Gold’s comments implying her weight impacted her program may not have been far off. As long as a skater is performing well, an issue can go unnoticed. In reality, the lack of acknowledgement for disordered behaviors within the sport can be problematic; Kirk was happy that there were lot of

positive responses with her opening up about her eating disorder, but still sees a problem in the lack of openness and public awareness.

Eating disorder backgrounds in figure skating displays how pressures and expectations have lasted a long time. Coach statements, peer opinions, and media images and description of the feminine aspects of figure skating instill a discourse that encourages a culture in which thinness becomes tied to athletic ability. This is significant in analyzing media discourse about Gracie Gold, as it displays how patriarchal ideals keep the sports arena male-dominated by maintaining a certain status quo in coverage of female athletes.

## **Analysis**

### *Media Depictions of Gracie Pre-Announcement*

Before the announcement of Gracie Gold's struggles, she was largely depicted as a star. The height of Gold's popularity began during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, when her blonde hair, dazzling smile, and ruby-red lips often characterized Gold. During the 2014 Sochi Olympics Gold emerged as a top performer; as a result, the media blew up with articles about her stardom. However, much of the media coverage was not focused on her jumps, her grace, or her ability; it was focused on her appearance. One reporter refers to Gracie as the "*Sports Illustrated* cover girl" who "can flash her teeth with the best of them, and she also brings an ideal skating physique and eye-catching blonde hair to the ice" (Weir, 2014). Some reporters referred to her as being comparable to Grace Kelly, a notable movie star (Chase, 2014). Many stars in aesthetic sports of course have great abilities, but they definitely are also aesthetic by society's standards. Many articles surrounding Gracie's 2014 Sochi Olympics success had some mention of her looks. Here the emphasis is not on her jumps, her spins, her body movement, or her physical strength. Rather,

much of the description emphasizes her appearance. This reinforces previous research demonstrating that female coverage often focuses on looks and personal life rather than athletic abilities (“Aesthetics over athletics...”, 2016). Referring to Gold mainly based on appearance diminishes her athletic capabilities. Further, media coverage highlighting these feminine qualities deepens the patriarchal roots of sports and sports coverage, maintaining that for females, it is more important to focus on their appearance rather than their strength.

Not only does Gracie Gold’s pre-announcement coverage establish a “golden-girl” image, but also it reinforces the figure skating stereotype. One reporter for *USA Today* declares, “Gracie Gold looks the part. With blonde hair pulled into a bun, a dress straight out of a fairy tale and a free skate to Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty*, all that’s seemingly missing is a tiara and a kiss from a prince” (Whiteside, 2014). There are multiple aspects of this statement that are problematic. First, the accentuation of her appearance: this reporter implies that in figure skating athletics are not the most important, but that looks are equally if not more vital to an athlete’s success. Pointing out the blonde bun and the princess-like dress contribute to these, focusing on the feminine components of figure skating. Additionally, while the song she skated to was in fact named after a princess, the comments about a tiara and a kiss from a prince are unnecessary. These imply that she is almost too good to be true because she is so beautiful and represents the epitome of what an ice princess should be. Traditional feminine stereotypes such as reliance of a man, loving sparkling dainty materials like tiaras, and dreaming of being a princess once again distract from the skating ability. Furthermore, these comments literally say she “looks” the way a figure skater should—emphasizing appearance. Another article after her rise to stardom is captioned: “She’s the adorably blond, red lipstick-wearing teen who may be America’s best chance at ending a drought in ladies figure skating” (Fixler, 2014). This again sets the stage for

an article revering her movie-star good looks rather than her athleticism and strength. Red lipstick and blonde hair are stereotypical American beauty qualities. By pointing out these characteristics rather than Gracie's speed, strength training regimen, sharp turns, and the like, reporters suggest the importance of looks and feminine qualities over athletic abilities; Gold is not identified as a strong figure skater, but rather as the ideal female. Again, this reinforces the patriarchal nature of sports. Describing female athletes based on their appearance and personal life, they downplay strength characteristics that go against traditional standards of femininity. These pressures transcend the headlines into the sidelines, with coaches, peers, and the like.

Research has shown that coaches can play a role in a figure skater's body image (Buchholz, Mack, McVey, Feder, & Barrowman, 2008). Former Olympic figure skater Jenny Kirk has opened up about the prevalence of eating disorders in figure skating. In an interview Kirk discloses, "At a competition, weight is usually made to be an indicator of who is ready to 'fight' and who isn't prepared for the event. There were dozens of times when my coaches or those around me told me not to worry about a certain competitor because they had gained weight, which according to them meant that the skater wasn't a threat anymore" (Coker, 2010). In aesthetic sports weight is assumed to correlate with performance. The more thin and wiry an athlete is, the more precise and clean her movements will be. While this may make sense in some technical aspects, females who have been figure skating since they were extremely young cannot control how their body develops—unless they try to starve it. In 2013 Gracie Gold decided to step her training up a level by pairing with notorious coach Frank Carroll. In interviews following Gracie's successes Carroll beams, "I think she's incredibly elegant...She has a beautiful face, a beautiful body and she's long and she jumps high and she floats through the air...Kind of a complete package" (Whiteside, 2014). This statement clearly demonstrates the

expectations of the ideal figure skater. While this may have been positive for Gold at first, it surely must have also put immense pressure on her shoulders. Perhaps Carroll viewed her potential as being the “next” Michelle Kwan, who was an American darling during her Olympic career. Nonetheless, while positive remarks from coaches are encouraging, they can also provoke stress to maintain this perfect image in all aspects. Similar to news commentary, most of Carroll’s recorded comments are on Gracie Gold’s appearance, with few remarks about her performance and athleticism. This can instill the feeling of needing to live up to feminine ideals; it would be a better model for a coach like Frank Carroll to be emphasizing Gold’s athleticism, strength, and training capabilities.

#### *Gracie’s Depiction of Herself Pre-Announcement*

As described above, Gracie stepped onto the scene and became the apparent “next Grace Kelly,” praised for her potential to be the next notorious American figure skater. Despite this, her view of herself did not seem to align with that of the public’s. While she was not very vocal about any self-image issues during the 2014 or 2015 seasons, in 2016 Gold opened up about her body struggles. After her poor performance at Skate America in 2016 Gracie Gold told reporters, “We just need to adjust my physical shape and mental shape to see if the program can be salvaged for the rest of the year” (Brennan, 2016). She alluded to the fact that her weight was negatively impacting her performance; in a video of this interview on YouTube, the lack of confidence was written all over her face. Her eyes were sad, she seemed closed off, and her shoulders slouched. To many, her body looks very fit compared to the average American; however, Gold admitting this struggle displays the pressure she was facing in the world of figure skating. She claimed that her body was “just not what’s required for this sport. It’s a lean body

sport and it's just not what I have currently" (Brennan, 2016). This statement sparked a response from users of figure skating forum *Golden Skate*. Debates go back and forth between whether or not there is an "ideal" body for figure skating, with the general consensus being that leaner bodies perform better ("Gracie Gold opens up...", 2017). One poster @LiamForeman mentions, "I admire Gracie for her candor, and I think she knows she's 'skater overweight.' Maybe she just doesn't care anymore, and is doing this to get out of all the pressure" ("Gracie Gold opens up...", 2017). In this discussion it is clear that aesthetic sports perpetuate a thin ideal in order to be athletically capable. To Gracie and to many spectators of aesthetic sports, there is a certain body type that is admired and expected. Many argue that a thinner body makes a better skater because they can execute programs better. In this sense, the female athletic body becomes a site of rhetoric that portrays skill or a lack of it, discipline or a lack of it, and star quality—or a lack of it. Gracie's insecurities continued to be covered by the news media leading up to her official announcement of withdrawal.

Gracie Gold revealed more about her insecurities when describing her distaste with her legs. Mid-2017, in response to TODAY Style's "Why I Love My..." series Gold explained:

I decided to answer, 'I love my legs,' because I used to hate them... And a lot of times I still do hate them. However, I'm learning to love them. I love them most of the time. But sometimes, I think, oh, they're too big, they don't look like the legs you see in the magazines. But I love how strong they are. They can lift a lot. They can run far. I love how powerful they are (Murray, 2017).

This comment was published just 3 months before Gracie announced her break from the sport in September 2017. Her love and hate of her legs shows how she wavers between acceptance and struggle with body image. On one hand her legs are powerful and fuel her training and programs,

but on the other hand the figure skating world tends to favor media's feminine ideals. This means that leaner legs are more aesthetically appealing. Thus, athletes are expected to maintain their athletic abilities while also conforming to a thinner ideal. Due to the fact that gender is so binary in our society, one is considered feminine or masculine—there is a lack of fluidity. Muscles and athletic strength are considered more traditionally masculine features, discouraging females from getting too “bulky” or muscular. In an interview Gracie Gold explains she trains on the ice for four hours each day, followed by more cardio and strength training (Goyanes, 2017). Intense training like this requires proper fuel, but in order to maintain a lean figure many skaters do not eat enough for how much they are training. Thus, developing an eating disorder can be detrimental to the body's function. Nonetheless, Gracie's reputation as the media's golden girl, coach pressure to maintain a certain weight, and the typical figure skater body type put immense strain on Gold's psyche and body.

### *Media Depictions of Gracie Post-Announcement and Its Impact*

While it is a shame that Gracie Gold's skating and psyche suffered through her struggles, her announcement brought many benefits in regards to raising awareness about eating disorders. Specifically, after her announcement, more athletes have opened up about their struggles. Though the discourse regarding female athletes in the media has not shifted, it is important that Gold's struggles have opened up a discussion about the eating habits of figure skaters. In fact, both female *and* male skaters have come forward with their issues. More interestingly, according to the statements that have been made, many of these issues stemmed from an initial comment made by a coach.

Firstly, female figure skaters from various countries opened up about disordered behaviors. Around the same time as Gracie, Russian skater Yulia Lipnitskaya announced that she

was permanently retiring from figure skating after a long struggle with anorexia nervosa. She was quoted as saying, “Anorexia is a disease of the 21st century...It is quite common. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to cope with it” (Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). Eating disorders typically root from external stressors; the commonly held dogma in figure skating is that lighter skaters can jump better, turn better, and are all around more graceful. This is embedded into the figure skating culture, and is often enforced by coaches. For example, Akiko Suzuki, a Japanese figure skater, dropped 35 pounds in a mere few months after her coach told her losing some weight could help her jumps (Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). To put this into perspective, she dropped from an already light 105 pounds to 70 pounds. She lost much of her strength and had to take a year off because of her disorder. Aya Nishizono-Maher, a professor at Shiraume Gakuen University in Japan, explains, “In some clubs, the coaches weigh you before practice. And still some call the girls ‘pig’ or ‘fat’ when they gain” (Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). Some argue that the light weight is necessary because when a figure skater comes down on the ice, the weight on the skate is about 100 times the force of a skater’s body (Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). Nonetheless, this type of discourse is problematic because a single comment to a skater can cause a lot of damage that persists for a long time. Compromising health and quality of life is not worth the medal; Gold is setting a good example for this. The end of Elaine Lies’ article depicts Gracie Gold and Yulia Lipnitskaya as brave for coming out to the public about their very private obstacles. Post-announcement news coverage of Gracie Gold mostly depicts her as strong and overcoming a battle—language that was not used during her active skating career. This is interesting because while she was executing triple flips and triple lutztes, she was acknowledged for her red lipstick and blonde bun. Apparent mental strength is highlighted, but seldom is physical strength admired by the media depictions of female athletes.

Despite shortcomings in media framing and use of language, Gracie Gold's announcement has caused a positive shift in the sense that there is an increase in discourse regarding mental health issues and eating disorders in figure skating. Joe Johnson, a USA Team figure skater, even said, "Gracie coming forward was radical" (Cox, 2018). While skaters have opened up about eating disorders in the past, there has never really been a large outpouring of athletes depicting their issues. Though some seemed to be aware of the issues of disordered behavior within the figure skating world, it was still a topic rarely discussed. Joe Johnson explains that many figure skaters do not reveal their struggles because they do not want to seem weak (Cox, 2018). Interestingly enough, most depictions of Gold post-announcement describe her strength for opening up about her issues. The pressure within the extremity of figure skating as an aesthetic sport along with probably pressure from coaches and society to remain thin can keep these extremes concealed. Johnson explains that a lot of coaches judge performance based on a skaters weight: "Some coaches have a saying that 'fat don't fly'. Regardless of your height or natural build, they believe if you're outside a certain weight range, you won't be able to execute jumps, and that's what they use to justify these statements" (Cox, 2018). Some even go further to compare their skaters weights to those of medalists. For a highly competitive and subjective sport like figure skating, these types of comments can be detrimental because they may encourage "dedicated" athletes to go to extremes to maintain prestige. While these issues confront male skaters as well—Team USA skater Adam Rippon, who used to live on three slices of bread per day—females also struggle with fighting their biology as they age and may develop curves (Martin, 2018). Clearly the figure skating culture perpetuates a thin ideal that simple is not attainable for many individuals, no matter how healthy they are.

Again, most competitive skaters begin at a very young age, before their female bodies develop. As the female figure skaters age, they may try to fight this process by starving, out of fear that coaches may reject their abilities. Karina Manta, a Team USA skater who has also struggled from an eating disorder discloses, “The rhetoric in skating, which I think causes a lot of eating disorders, is that if you starve yourself, your body won’t change” (Cox, 2018). By trying to fit into the ideal figure skater standard, female athletes may do a lot of harm. Manta explains that girls that try to offset this process may lose their period for years, and stress fractures or other injuries may occur due to inadequate nutrition. Akiko Suzuki could no longer perform because her disorder caused her to be much too weak to skate (Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). Nonetheless, her behavior was not halted until it became a *serious* problem inhibiting her from skating. The measures that some skaters go to are shocking—but it is surprising that not much has been said about it until now. Fortunately, Gold’s announcement initiated more recognition, which is positive. Despite this, most the coverage post-announcement in relation to figure skaters and eating disorders focuses on emotional aspects (Cox, 2018; Lies & Tetrault-Farber, 2018). This is significant because it appeals to a pattern of female athlete coverage as discovered by content analysis of news broadcasting: female coverage focuses on personal and appearance-based content (Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2010). Accentuating emotional competence rather than physical competence in female figure skaters reinforces gender binaries because females are *supposed* to be emotional. This makes mental dexterity socially acceptable, but when it comes to actual performances, media commentary remains “safe” by pointing out beauty rather than athleticism. This subtly and implicitly keeps the dominant group in place. Perhaps the rhetoric could shift away from the reinforcement of gendered norms—if media commentary praised

physical strength and skill more than it acknowledged female athletes' physical appearances and personal lives.

## **Discussion**

### *A Need for Awareness and Change*

It is clear that eating disorders are a huge issue in aesthetic sports. Furthermore, they are a large obstacle for female athletes: “Studies show that athletes are two to three times more likely to have an eating disorder than non-athletes. In some aesthetic sports, where weight and body image are emphasized, data shows that as many as 42% of female athletes in this population have eating disorders” (“Athletes”, 2018). Pressure to maintain a certain physique for performance can be detrimental. Furthermore, the negotiation between feminine and athletic identities can be difficult, manifesting in eating disorders. It is important to remember that just because someone participates in sports, this does not mean they are healthy; furthermore, just because someone is thin, this does not mean they are healthy. It is pivotal that Gracie Gold decided to be so public about her struggles, because many figure skaters—both female and male—have since opened up about these pressures. Even so, there is not much awareness about athletes in general struggling with eating disorders. When Gold and other female figure skaters disclosed their eating patterns to the media they were referred to as strong. While in season and skating exceptionally, female skaters were regarded for their lipstick color and body shape rather than their strength. These distinctions are significant because they emphasize the wrong aspects of sport and reinforce norms in the sense that strength becomes gendered. Men are strong because of their athleticism, while women are strong because of their emotional capacity to persevere through an endeavor like an eating disorder. While eating disorder survivors are indeed

strong, it is wrong to use their courage as an outlet for the persistence of gendered framing. The females are only strong when they are overcoming something emotional, not when they are performing and practicing powerfully. Lack of acknowledgement for their athleticism and strength beyond the mental does not set a good example for anyone, athlete or not, in regards to eating disorders.

While female athletes have a higher probability of struggling from an eating disorder, of course they are not the sole population impacted. Eating disorders in American society have been a long time problem, and studies have shown that media images contribute to poor body image and may increase potential in eating disorder behaviors (Harrison, 2000; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Due to this fact, it is necessary to consider creating positive and diverse images all around in media. In general, celebrities, models, and other public figures are stick thin. There lack of coverage of female athletes in the news media without feminization or sexual objectification; this creates disparities in representation of a variety of body types. When women are only exposed to thin women in the media, this implicitly creates the idea that these bodies are considered more beautiful and socially acceptable. Furthermore, in American society diets are normalized, creating a diet culture where it seems the majority of the population is constantly taking weight control measures. A persistent emphasis on weight control and thinness may be detrimental to body image and cause eating disorders. I believe if female athletes of all shapes and sizes were more present in the media, depicted strong and capable because of their athletic performance, this could create a positive change. Change will not occur until the root cause is recognized: the persistence of a patriarchal society.

*A Personal Anecdote*

There is no question that there are plenty of stigmas around eating disorders. Sometimes they are unintentionally glamorized with quirky characters like Cassie Ainsworth in the UK's *Skins*. *Dr. Phil* often recounts stories where eating disorders tear families and relationships apart. Generally, the media tends to portray disorders as a shame, a disease, or something to persevere through to recover and become competent again. Strength is only found through recovery—this is a message apparent in the several strength stories of women revealing their own eating disorders in figure skating in light of Gracie Gold's announcement. While it is beneficial that there is at least now *some* discourse regarding eating disorders in athletics beyond the fragile narrative in TV shows and movies, there is not nearly enough awareness. Furthermore, there is still not enough media initiative in representing an array of female body types—the majority of celebrities and public figures are still thin, and there is still not enough coverage of female sports in general.

As someone who has suffered from an eating disorder for a few years, I know firsthand how difficult it is to recover, especially with media messages. My eating disorder began because someone I look up to told me that I put on weight, and that clothes I wear are not as flattering that they used to be. This caused a vicious cycle that has plagued my life for a long time. Recovery has been hard with the presence of social media, causing me to constantly be bombarded by images of thin women from all around the world. With image-based networks like Instagram, it becomes difficult to not feel insecure. I think a lot of people could benefit from seeing more of the Serena Williams' of the world, and models of all shapes and sizes, like Ashley Graham, in the media and on billboards. There is a lack of acknowledgement that the

media is a problem; furthermore, the media really does not do much about it, besides posts a few endearing headlines here and there.

Of course, change does not come easily. With any societal issue that exists, there are always underlying root causes; problems do not only exist on the surface. The expectation of femininity is deeply embedded in America's patriarchal society, and thus is pervasive, often without us even recognizing it. It is perpetuated through advertisements, in commentary, and in lack of a variety of commentary. Gracie Gold and her counterparts were only regarded as strong in the emotional sense, and seldom in the physical sense. The Olympics sees a heightening of female athlete coverage, but otherwise it is dismal. Strong women on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine are often in swimsuits and rarely in their typical action shots. Without structural change to patriarchal ideas that intense sports are best suited for men, the media will continue to ignore female sport success, and there will continue to be a lack of diversity of female body type and ability within the media. By no means will media changes fix the eating disorder problem, but it would be positive to see more female role models in the media that are not stick thin. More representation is the first step: strong females are more than emotional.

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