

Distinguished Visitor

in women's studies

On sports media:

"Women in sport are invisible. Even when we are really doing amazing things we're invisible. I think the invisibility is completely tied to the way in which men need to define themselves through sport."

On women as players:

"I had to confront the fact that people were actually very angry with me because I simply showed up to do a bike race. I knew from a very early age that I would be writing about this."

On the influence of the women's movement:

"The 'personal' really became 'political' for me because I could see that what I was experiencing in sport was what other women in their roles in their lives were experiencing."

On sexism and racism:

"If it is dangerous for a white woman to ride her bike on a lonely trail, it is way more dangerous for a First Nations woman to ride her bike there, and that's another thing that we don't acknowledge."

On sexism and violence:

"I've known forever that hockey in particular is a very sexist sport culture. When you add violence and you add sort of the theatre of maleness, you get a very deadly combination."

Laura Robinson

Distinguished Visitor in Women's Studies 2011

"When I was young, I realized there's something about cycling that makes people think that anyone who is good at it is male, and then I realized that every sport was like that."



Journalist Laura Robinson knows first-hand the challenges of being a woman in sport. A three-time Ontario cycling champion, 1979 Ontario and Canadian rowing champion, active Nordic skier and runner, Robinson recalls an active childhood in which she was encouraged by her family to pursue her love for athletics. She was surprised and angered to find, even at a young age, that the sports in which she participated, and sports in general, were not welcoming to girls and women.

Growing up in what is now Mississauga, Ontario, Robinson discovered her interest in cycling when a group of local boys biked to her house. "I saw this long line of bicycles outside of our house and I knew that I had to be a cyclist," she recalls. "They just glinted in the sun and they looked so fast. I saved my baby-sitting money for about three or four months and I bought a ten-speed."

It was after she started to pursue competitive cycling that Robinson noticed the attitude taken toward women in her sport. "While my own cycling club was wonderful – and they really supported me – once I went beyond and started racing at a provincial level, it was clear that a lot of people didn't want the women there at all," she says.

This experience, coupled with her exposure to the women's movement in the 1970s, inspired Robinson to tell the story of misogyny in sport. She has made this feminist perspective the basis of her sports analysis over the course of her career.

In the eighth grade, thanks to the encouragement of her English teacher, Robinson discovered she had the same passion for writing as she did for cycling, and decided to pursue journalism. "I thought I could be a writer, and I could be a cyclist, and I would always be swept away," she remembers. Today, the author of six books on sport, winner of several prestigious awards for journalism and the silver medal for the 2011 Book of the Year Award from the American Library Association for her children's book, "Cyclist BikeList: The Book For Every Rider," as well as a successful athlete, Robinson has balanced her love of writing with athletics.

In 1992, Robinson became the first Canadian to write about sports and sexual abuse when the *Toronto Star* published her article, "Sexual Abuse: Sport's Dirty Little Secret." Despite her expertise, Robinson often finds her comments overlooked. "No one is talking about it. I'm talking about it. It is easier to be published in Europe," she observes. Even though things are starting to change, "There is still unbelievable resistance in Canada," she says, recalling an instance in which a story linking sexual violence to sport was dropped the day before publication.

SAVE THE DATE

DISTINGUISHED VISITOR IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

University of Windsor

Week of Events: October 19-26, 2011

Community Dinner

Date: Wednesday 19 October

Time: 5:30 p.m. Reception, 6:30 p.m. Dinner

Place: G. Caboto Club, 2175 Parent Ave. at Tecumseh Rd.



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On youth and sport:

"We have people who would love to have their children being physically active who can't begin to afford it and then we have children who are learning to perform for adults instead of just enjoying the beauty of sport. To me, that's a dangerous and exclusive combination."

On femininity and the female athlete:

"Women athletes are pressured to be feminine in big quotation marks when we're not competing. I saw that with women quickly putting makeup on, or wearing makeup which looked hideous by the time they finished the bike race because it was streaked all over their faces."

On objectification:

"I think that a lot of girls and women, and a lot of athletes, think that it's normal to become an object in some way. I think this has a lot to do with our screen culture. Girls submit to things that are derogatory and negative for their health and safety. They have been taught that's all their job is: to be an object in some screen culture."

On commodification:

"As long as sport is so commercialized, athletes will be objectified because they become a product."

**Laura Robinson will be in Windsor
October 19-25, 2011**

**For more information about events:
www.uwindsor.ca/wsvisitor**

It is not surprising that Robinson recognizes media representation as a major problem facing female athletes. "First of all," she says, "women are invisible," noting the complete imbalance of coverage afforded men's and women's sporting events, regardless of the athletes' success. Also linked to representation is the issue of objectification, which Robinson sees in the proliferation of female athletes featured in bikini spreads in publications like *Sports Illustrated*.

Her book, *Black Tights: Women, Sport, and Sexuality*, deals with the hypersexualization of female athletes and suggests we re-consider sexuality, sport, and the body on a more general level. Part of this includes a return to the pleasure of sport for the sake of sport, rather than the commoditized culture of sport we now accept. Robinson explains, "The pleasure of sport gets lost in all that. It becomes something that people watch vicariously and try to understand their sporting experience through the bodies of others. Generally speaking that is the bodies of male athletes."

For Robinson, sport can be a location for a radical shift in thinking about bodies. While she acknowledges the pressure to be thin that still hounds women and drives the fitness industry, she separates this from the pleasure of athleticism. "I do think that when you really get into something you forget all that stuff you've been taught by the media and you just really become one with the body. That's one of the really wonderful things about sport. It takes you to a place where you don't think about things like that."

In her consideration of bodies and sport, Robinson puts particular emphasis on the many groups – not just women – that mainstream sports coverage renders invisible. "Anything that's not a white male, and in some circumstances a non-white male, is the wrong body," she explains. "Of course, a disabled body, even more so."

Robinson's first children's book, *Great Girls: Profiles of Awesome Canadian Athletes*, highlights a number of female athletes with disabilities who generally do not receive equal media attention. She notes that even when the Paralympics were held in Vancouver, hardly any Canadian papers sent reporters to cover the games, compared with the intense Olympic coverage.

Racialization in sport also comes under criticism in Robinson's work, such as the stereotype surrounding athletes of colour and their supposed "natural" talent for sport.

Robinson puts great stock in the power of youth. "Children are everything. Period," she says. "We really need to take much better care of children." In order to do this, Robinson explains we must change to a less institutionalized sports model for youth athletics. She works for a radical re-imagining of sports and athletics as a more positive and equitable field. "We really have to care about everyone's bodies, the health of bodies and not bodies as spectacle," she says. "It is a big thing, a huge undertaking."