

“Extraordinary, enraging and inspiring”

Judy Murray OBE



PREVIEW

The Last Bastion

A History of Women in Sport
1984-2024

Rachel Hewitt

Foreword by Tessa Sanderson CBE

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FOREWORD

By Tessa Sanderson CBE

Women in Sport ambassador and Olympic javelin gold medallist

Competing and winning on the global stage is an incredible thrill, but it is only one of the ways sport can shape our lives and bring us joy.

Women in Sport has been fighting for the right of all girls and women to share in the fulfilment and health benefits sport can bring since the summer of 1984 – the very summer I won that historic gold in Los Angeles.

We're inextricably linked by a powerful moment in time and an unshakeable belief: women and girls belong in sport. Back in 1984, when I made history becoming the first Black British woman to win gold in an Olympic throwing event, I came home and found myself unemployed. In those days sponsorship was only available to the lucky few. Mainly men.

Recognition was scarce. When talking about whether paying crowds would come to see us compete I was once told: 'You women wouldn't fill a telephone box.' That kind of narrow-mindedness persists but thankfully women in all kinds of sports have been filling big stadiums for some time now. It's heartening to see sold-out crowds and widespread media coverage of women's events, but, as you'll read in the pages that follow, this progress has never been anything less than a fight.

I feel bound to every other woman who has faced down prejudice and cynicism. It's essential for us to champion each other, as we have done for decades. The bridesmaids at my

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wedding were all Olympians, a testament to the unity I feel with all my sisters. Being Black added another layer of challenge for many of us, but the bond we share as women in sport is unbreakable.

Global success is rare. It's always been harder for women with talent to achieve their potential. I often think about all the women who didn't achieve success at an elite level because the support and encouragement for their talent just wasn't there. Many found joy and fulfilment by becoming PE teachers and coaches instead, like the woman who discovered me in school and inspired me to compete. Without her, and without sport, I'd never have started off on the path that took me to six Olympic games.

Make no mistake, there are wins to celebrate in the last forty years. Triumphs on courts and tracks, in gyms and boardrooms, in schools and broadcast studios, but they are hard won.

If the last four decades have taught me anything it is that nothing is guaranteed. That is why the work of Women in Sport is so vital. Every setback we overcome, every time we stay in the fight, is a victory in itself.

Forty years of conviction and hope is powerfully captured here by the inspiring author and ultra-runner Rachel Hewitt. As an ambassador for Women in Sport, I am proud to endorse her compelling history. As we look to the future, I'm filled with hope that Women in Sport will continue its fearless advocacy for the next generation of girls.

Introduction

FIGHTING THE LAST BASTION

On Friday 18 May 1984, a small group of women made their way towards the Allen & Unwin publishing house on Boswell Street in London's Bloomsbury. Four had travelled into London from the North and Midlands. Perhaps they met near St Pancras station, and walked together on the cool spring morning. If so, they would almost certainly have passed the Russell Square hotel where preparations were being made for a gala that afternoon, to celebrate the men who would be officiating at the men's FA Cup Final in Wembley the following day. The equivalent women's football match had taken place just under a fortnight earlier, in a small stadium in Lincoln, and had received no such fanfare. Perhaps the women noticed and commented on this discrepancy: they were in London to talk about women, equality and sport, after all...

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HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

Stephanie Hilborne

As Women in Sport approached its fortieth anniversary, we wanted to capture the charity's story in a manner befitting of its founders' intelligence and courage. A member of the team had met non-fiction writer Rachel Hewitt, and a number had read her inspiring book *In Her Nature: How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors*. So we were delighted that Rachel agreed to take on this task. We initially envisaged that writing a brief history would take a few months, and result in a pamphlet of 20,000 words. As the richness of WiS's history became apparent, the project more than doubled in length and resulted in *The Last Bastion*. Given our constraints, the book's research was primarily based on written documentation from archives, but a limited number of interviews did become possible as we found out more about the remarkable women involved in the charity's history.

Some of our new connections were the result of chance encounters. We were able to reconnect with past Chair Monica Vaughan through an unexpected meeting with her nephew, a lawyer, at an event about marriage and the law. I met Jenny Thomas, who had run an inspiring programme of women oriented sports events at Morley College in the 1980s and 1990s, at an event at Hampstead Cricket Club. The precise date of WiS's founding came to light after my mother's neighbour discovered in her loft the Guardian newspaper issue of 18 May 1984, which included Derek Wyatt's article about WiS's first ever meeting.

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I crossed paths with Sarah Springman when she was speaking in her capacity as Principal of St Hilda's College, Oxford at an event regarding brain injury. I was struck by her natural authority, but – until she enlightened me – I was totally ignorant of her connection with WiS, and only found out later about her remarkable sporting career, her role in making triathlon equal and her powerful letters to sexist journalists. Sarah later introduced me to her wife, Rosie Mayglothling, another significant figure in WiS's history, who connected us with Celia Brackenridge's widow, Diana Woodward. All of us involved are desperately sad not to have met Celia, but talking to Diana was illuminating. In turn, Diana introduced us to Eileen Langsley, whose story is so powerful and whose photographs have helped to change the face of sport.

Anita White has been immensely helpful throughout this process and introduced us to a number of key people, including founder member Lyn Guest de Swarte who rang me unexpectedly on my allotment one day when I was knee deep in soil, and recounted some fantastic stories. The rich seam of historical information at the Anita White Collection in the University of Chichester's Library's Special Collections only existed because Anita had sent her team up to London to rescue boxes of reports and correspondence at risk of being discarded in an office move many years earlier. Julia George from the WiS staff team tracked down a past address for Enid Grimshaw, only to find out that sadly she had passed away but did make contact with her daughter and granddaughter and, through them, found an image of Enid who was an exceptional advocate for equality, especially in women's bowls, in the 1980s and 1990s.

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It is important to clarify to readers that *The Last Bastion* is still a short commemorative publication, which was produced in a brief span of time. It was never intended to be a comprehensive history, and, instead, it narrates the story of WiS via a snapshot of four key themes in its work. We apologise to any individuals, groups or organisations who may be disappointed to find themselves under-represented in these pages. It is also important to recognise that, given the nature of the charity, these pages inevitably describe moments of conflict between WiS and certain sports organisations in the past. Many of those organisations have since undergone profound shifts in character and constitution, and have developed far more positive attitudes to women and girls in sport. We do not intend that *The Last Bastion's* portrayals of such organisations' historic attitudes should be interpreted as commentary upon their present-day character.

We are indebted to Rachel for her drive and the diligence of her research; for the many hours and days she has spent working through an enormous amount of written material and for the brilliance of her writing and story-telling.

END OF PREVIEW