



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Interview of the Month
Paula Radcliffe
Women's world record holder in marathon running
December 2016**

1. GenderHopes: You are one of Britain's most successful athletes. Thinking of the ways in which society treats male athletes (and sports players), do you feel you've faced different challenges as a female athlete?

Paula Radcliffe: I actually feel that I am very lucky to be in one of the few sports where I truly believe male and female athletes are treated equally. I think that within the coaching and support set up there is generally little difference between how the sexes are treated - rather athletes' individual needs are examined and catered for. Also within the media, I believe on the road running side that greater differences appear for national bias than ever do for sexist reasons. This is largely due to the efforts of strong women before me such as Katherine Switzer (fought for women to be able to take part in marathons) and those who battled to show that women could run longer than 800m without doing serious long-term damage to their reproductive capacities!! When I started out racing there was a huge disparity between male and female prize money in races but again here today this is pretty much equal everywhere and certainly in major races. That said I know that there are many sports where women really are still fighting for equality or even something approaching this.

However I do think that female athletes face particular challenges that our male counterparts don't have to worry about. Simply starting a family is one - acknowledging that to take this important step that so many of us wants to, will necessitate at least a year away from competition and career and then significant organisation and family support from then on. Also women's psyche and emotional make up, as much as their physical responses to training and competition, are very different. I was very lucky in having an early coach who really understood the female psyche at the key teenage stage and beyond. Then later I have been able to work with my husband (coach) and other national coaches in explaining key differences in how you motivate and coach female athletes as opposed to our male counterparts.

2. Looking at the media coverage of the Rio Olympics last August, specifically the coverage of female athletes' achievements (the focus on their physical appearance and even giving the credit to men for

women's victories), what are your thoughts on how female athletes are represented in the media? How can we counter this?

Again I generally think this is slowly improving. Aside from the hyper-androgenism issues which certainly focused on physical appearance but actually is a far more complicated and misunderstood area, most mocking of physical appearances are laughed off easily since the women themselves see them as positive attributes for their performance and success. For example, some might see a skinny flat chested body as less feminine but when it helps you run faster and have greater endurance, who cares! Same for muscular physique that brings strength and elasticity with it. I think every athlete - male or female- develops to the stage where they are grateful and look after their body for what it is capable rather than being concerned for what is socially acceptable.

There is a certain sway in the media to report the males behind the success and team but in fairness there are also far fewer female coaches and support staff so this is inevitable. Also (going out on a bit of a limb here...) perhaps it is more prominent within the female mentality to express thanks and gratitude to support team in the immediate post event interviews. What's more, there is a certain and distinct lack of good female sports journalists which I think is definitely reflected in the media reports and content.

3. Throughout your career or personal life, have you encountered sexism/discrimination and how have you challenged it?

I have been lucky not to have faced too much. Certainly my parents raised my brother and myself to believe that we were capable of working hard to achieve whatever goals we put our minds to and that our sex was not an issue in achieving this. When I have faced discrimination, I have relied on the advice given to me by role models, parents and grandparents and fought it by doing the very best job that I could possibly do and using it as motivation to work harder and show what I could do. Generally it has just been small, like being told a girl can't do something, or a girl is weaker or having it assumed that in a relationship it should be my career that takes the back seat (regardless to say that one didn't last!). I remember when I first arrived in a high-altitude training base being told by a male athlete that they ran up the side of a mountain to the high plateau on the top but that a girl couldn't do that and I should walk up. The first session there I ran the whole way up and continued doing so since!

4. You are also the mother of two young children, a girl and a boy. Do you feel that they face the same obstacles in life and does it affect the way you raise them?

I try to treat both my children as individuals and support them and help them to make life and sporting choices according to their strengths and passions rather than trying to fit into any social or sporting 'box'. I honestly believe that

we are all unique and different and the earlier in life that we recognise our own strengths and weaknesses, and have the courage to choose the life direction that we have the greatest passion for, and therefore will commit greater time and energy to, the better. So I certainly feel that they both face very different obstacles and challenges and definitely have very different ways of overcoming them, but I feel these are more due to character than their sex. That said, going back to the first answer and the differences in how a girl is motivated to work harder and do better as compared to a boy, I do believe this is very true and I try as much as possible to motivate my children in the way that will help and support them the best. I am also very keen to teach my daughter that phrases such as 'girls don't play football' or 'cry like a girl' 'run/throw like a girl' are not to be taken as criticisms but rather opportunities to respond and show just what she is capable of.

5. Your father seems to have played a major role in your achievements. Did you have any female role models growing up?

My father was the one who first introduced me to running and I am very close to him but also to my mother and my grandmother (Olive) was a huge inspiration to me. We shared a birthday and a lot of characteristics and a lot of fun. She really inspired me by example to live my life to the full and go after all my goals and dreams. She was a laughing, gentle person but allowed very little to get in her way when she set her mind to something. She really taught me to persevere, be true to yourself, live by morals and integrity and get the most from yourself and life. She herself was extremely inspirational, born in 1917 weighing only 1.5kg yet she lived to 95, travelled the world, nursed during the blitz and the Second World War and afterwards until the age of 75, yet always had time to play games and laugh with us all. (As a child I wanted to be a nurse like her). All my memories of being with her make me laugh and smile still and I often share her advice and the things she taught me with my children. She did everything she could to encourage all her children and grandchildren and great grandchildren to enjoy their lives and get the best out of themselves. She never wasted time worrying about the little things in life or what she couldn't change, she just concentrated on the things she could do.

I also had sporting role models growing up, Peter Elliot, Steve Cram and Liz McColgan were early role models. Later the 3 First Ladies of marathon running; Ingrid Kristiansen, Grete Waitz and Joan Benoit Samuelson were big inspirations as much for the strong women and beautiful people that they are and were, as for their pioneering accomplishments in women's running.

6. What would your advice be to a young female athlete starting her career in the sports industry?

Set out your goals, dream big and dream high and be prepared to put the work in to get there. Love what you do, as that way you will be prepared to invest far more time and energy and will get so much more back from it. Stay true always to yourself and to your integrity: this makes you so much stronger

a person inside and out. Always respect the rules of the game and fellow competitors. If you hit an obstacle, regroup, reassess and find another way to keep trying.

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Paula Radcliffe was born in 1973. She joined Bedford and County Athletics Club at the age of 11 and competed at the World Cross Country Championships at 16. After graduating from Loughborough University in 1996, she devoted herself full-time to her running and is now acknowledged as one of the finest athletes of the modern era. Paula has established herself as the master of the ultimate distance race, the marathon. She holds the world record and won the London Marathon in 2002, 2003 and 2005. In November 2004 she won the New York Marathon in breath-taking style and in 2005 she took the gold medal at the World Championships in Helsinki for the same distance. She was awarded an MBE in June 2002 and later that year was voted the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year.