5th March 2015 - Sport Women in Rowing

**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** My Lords, I am delighted that the noble Lord, Lord Thomas of Gresford, has been able to secure this debate today. Rowing is a fantastic sport with many fans. I am one of them. Apart from the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Boat Race, there have been limited opportunities to watch this sport on TV. We should be very proud of the institution that is the Boat Race. It has a very special place in the hearts of the British public.

I found the opening speech of the noble Lord, Lord Thomas, quite amusing when he explained how it was considered unladylike to race side by side. I am very glad that in my own sporting career I was never marked on the skill and grace of my performance. I looked far more like somebody from the This Girl Can campaign: red, sweaty and snotty. I would definitely have been considered unladylike, and I am very pleased about that.

Having the women’s Boat Race on the same day as the men’s is a major step forward, but we must not forget that the women’s race has its own very proud history. Many casual fans might not know that the women’s race exists, but it is not a new invention. We should thank all those who got the race to where it is now. Many women, and men, campaigned for it. Credit should be given to Helene Morrissey, CEO of the sponsor and a Cambridge graduate, but not a rower. She is well known for her work on encouraging women. Money makes a difference to what to what we are trying to do. Annie Vernon wrote about Miss Morrissey and said:

“She refused to listen to excuses that women could not cope with negotiating the tides and bends of the men’s 7000m course”—

so in many ways it is remarkable how far we have come.

However, it is important that young women know a bit of the history—and are slightly horrified by it. In the Chamber this morning, the Minister, the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, said in the International Women’s Day debate that she did not want still to be talking about how far we have come in 20 years’ time, and that is very important.

If we look back at the history of the Boat Race, in 1927 there was much discussion about whether the women should be allowed to wear shorts or more demure gym tunics. One of the Cambridge rowers had to sit on a stool in front of university staff, simulating the action of rowing, to ascertain which clothes best preserved her modesty. Even in 1985, there was a picture in one of the papers, which is shown on the BBC website, of the women’s team in their gowns and fishnet tights, showing their legs. I hope that we have moved on a little from that.

For a bit of context, while we may consider some of these views slightly idiosyncratic, in my sport of athletics, it was only in 1984 that women were allowed to compete in the marathon and a very few distance races. Even in Moscow, the longest race women were allowed to do was the 1,500 metres, which was introduced only in 1972. Before 1960, it was considered safe for women to run only 200 metres. It took until the 2000 Games in Sydney for women to be able to compete in the pole vault. The excuse given each time was that it would have a detrimental effect on their ability to bear children. Tell that to Paula Radcliffe or Yelena Isinbayeva.

Looking back at 2012, it is hard to imagine anybody being hostile towards our amazing Olympic and Paralympic athletes. I cried when Katherine Grainger won—actually before she started. Ten strokes in, I knew that she was going to be fine, and it was good. I am very proud that Kat Copeland, who is also a gold medallist, lives in Ingleby Barwick, very close to where I live in the north-east of England. I drive past her gold postbox most weeks. That is an amazing inspiration for women who live around the River Tees, who can see rowing as an option for them going forward.

There are questions we still need to answer. As rowing is a sport which is deeply entrenched in the university structure, this is perhaps a place for Title IX to make the most impact. At Oxford this year, not only are the men’s and women’s races being held together for the first time but the men’s and women’s teams will be together at the post-race dinner. Well done, Oxford; I hope that Cambridge will follow next year.

We should also be very proud of Helene Rainsford, who other noble Lords have mentioned. She put women’s para-rowing on the map. In the interests of equality, in the mixed coxed team of Pam Relph, Naomi Riches and Lily van den Broecke, I will mention the two men in the team, David Smith and James Roe. I wonder how they feel—is it how women feel most of the time, being mentioned last? It is a little bit of a change around.

There are many challenges along the way for Paralympic rowing, including accessibility. Rivers are not the most accessible places for wheelchair users to be, but when I watch my daughter kayaking along the River Tees I am frequently asked by members of the rowing club whether I would like to join in. I very politely refuse, because I do not like moving water—but perhaps I could offer my services as a cheerleader for the Lords team. I will very happily sit and cheer from the terrace; I hope that that is an appropriate place to be.

There are also challenges with sponsorship. Women’s sport is an excellent opportunity to get involved in terms of branding, return on investment and encouraging people to think differently. Within our celebration, we must not forget that, back in 2013, British rowing carried out some research that was presented by Dr Alison Maitland, which showed that the traditional clubs value men’s events and achievements above women’s. For example, the Henley Women’s Regatta, which includes para-rowing, is not as valued by clubs as Henley Royal Regatta, which has no women’s club

events, only open and elite events for men. So perhaps investment by clubs and schools in women’s equipment, programmes and coaching does not have a high enough priority. I hope that having the men’s and women’s Boat Race on the same day will change this.